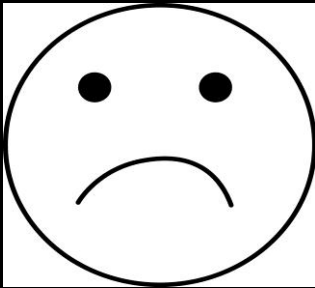


Flintown



A Plinio Tarden

de Goes Jr.

Novel

PREFACE

The City of Flint has consistently ranked as one of the poorest cities in America using every measure. It is one of the cities with the highest crime rates in the country. Each story in this collection represents a separate tale. Occasionally, I place the people of Flint abroad and relate their struggle to that of other people suffering in the Third World. The following pages give the reader an honest glimpse of the humor, courage, soul and power of a people who refuse to give up and who will, God willing, triumph at the end of a long, painful road.

1. INTRODUCTION TO FLINT

Redwoods leaves the jail and jumps into his rusty van, blasting the radio as he speeds down the highway. His left forearm carries a jailhouse tattoo, something his cell mate Rusty had carved into him with a pen strapped to a motor. Poor Rusty was serving a life sentence. The snow is falling over the *real* Gotham City. Crack-heads, assassins and streetwalkers dance under the blood red moon. The insufferable winter is everywhere, tight against his skin. He feels the Michigan winter the way you feel a woman you love pressed up against your body, whispering soft lullabies in your ear. Except this town ain't the type of place where love exists.

His body carries scars. All types of scars. Ugly scars. They seem to ache sometimes, as if the sutures could just burst at any second and the blood could leap out of his ribs and run down to his lap. How had he even gotten these scars? Pulling up to a gas station. A woman geeked out on rock is dancing near a pump wearing a short t-shirt and cut-off jeans in the dead of winter. She is smiling at him, dancing just for him, her teeth yellow and broken apart, her arms filled with holes.

This is Flint, America's realest city. The true blood and guts capital of the United States of America, where you either turn into a sick man or you get stabbed and left for dead on a snowy bank, the type of city that breeds hatred inside the hearts of every single one of its damned denizens. No love exists here. Death. A living death blesses these streets with a sad, sarcastic kiss. The kiss is like a mark on the forehead of each Flint boy, like a stamp sending him straight to Hell.

Redwoods knows a little too much about death. He had caused it, witnessed it, and felt its grasp only to

escape it too many times. His body is a living testament to survival. If only he could remember where all these scars and bullet holes on his sides, arms and back had come from in the first place. Flint. The City of Death. He pulls up to the curb and watches some chubby, short girls in hoodies with multi-colored hair smoke cigarettes and sell baggies. He is waiting for TK, good old reliable TK. As hard as a coffin nail and as tough as a leather bag. TK can stop bullets with a mean look. TK has no fear. He is one of those rare creatures who can thrive on the streets under the soul-sucking dim lights.

"What's up?" A voice strikes out into the silence like a dagger stabbing a bear's heart.

"TK!" Redwoods shouts.

TK is standing outside of the van, looking into the driver's seat with his vacuous red eyes.

"You gonna sit in there all night staring into space or you gonna get out and come with me? The place is just up the street." A good man. Always ready to hook his friends up. TK is here for Redwoods, one of his few remaining friends. No one else gives a damn anymore. Redwoods leaves the car and follows TK down a snowy path into the most dilapidated building Redwoods has ever seen - and he has seen the worst of them. The windows are boarded up and the brick walls are spray-painted with black graffiti.

"This is the place?" Redwoods asks incredulously. TK sighs.

"You have a record a mile long and you're gonna bitch about the place where you're staying?" TK asks.

"It's a legit place. Just be cool. You're lucky to have a place to sleep."

Redwoods nods and follows TK into the building. TK leads him down a dimly lit passageway filled with wet pipes to a padlocked metal door. Producing a key from his long black coat, he unlocks the door and swings it open.

"This is your place," TK announces grandiosely. "The place don't have no electricity or heating, but there is a fireplace and I bought some firewood. Just toss some firewood in there and light it up with some kerosene."

TK reaches into one of his myriad of pockets and produces a can of kerosene. He tosses the can at Redwoods and disappears, shutting the metal door behind him. A new life. A new beginning. Redwoods grabs some of the firewood left in a corner and places the logs inside the fireplace one by one, building a pyramid. He

splashes some kerosene onto the wood and lights it with a match. The fire springs to life explosively, a mushroom cloud jumping up into the chimney.

Looking around the illuminated room, Redwoods can tell that he is not in for a luxurious stay to say the least. While the outside of the building seems to indicate that the place is uninhabitable, the interior of the chamber confirms it beyond any doubt. Water drips down the bricks on the walls as if a water pipe has burst and the floorboards are shattered, splinters lying about amidst nails and newspapers.

"Jesus," Redwoods mutters to himself. He thinks about his childhood. Of course, it hadn't been anything wonderful. In one of those many foster homes, however, he had found a world different from the one he knew, a world miles away from the one where he is now. The Waldriges. A middle class family from Grand Rapids had taken him in like a stray dog with his tail tucked in between his legs. The Father? A tall bespectacled man with a librarian wife. Their home? Like something out of a movie from the fifties. Every day, the Waldriges ate together, praying before digging down into meals prepared with love. Husband and wife would hold hands, walking down the Grand Rapids streets.

This apartment is definitely not the Waldrige household. Whereas the Waldriges had kept cookies and milk crowning a table covered by a red tablecloth drooping down onto their linoleum floor, here there is not one scrap of food and there are no tables at all and the floor is covered with trash. From outside comes a sound much more appropriate to these dark parts than the Waldriges' ritzy neighborhood, a sound that Redwoods knows very well, a sound he has heard far too frequently in his life. He ignores the gunshots and goes to sleep.

He dreams about the nights in the pen when the psychos would scream for no reason at all, chanting strange tunes of longing. Their evil faces would light up and their eyes would stare at the Heavens, as if expecting a whole slew of Angels to come rescue them from the shadows. Of course, no one ever came. Who would come to a place like this? Devils and ghouls. Satan himself walked the halls saluting the prisoners. Sad stories and nights wishing you were dead. Cold nights under thin blankets. Pieces of bread and water swallowed through bruised mouths. Who would come to a place like this?

He wakes up with a start. Then, he remembers. His new pad. This is *home*. He stretches and slips his coat

on, heading into the night. He passes a hundred thousand homeless addicts gathered around barrels shooting fire and smoke into the air. They huddle against each other, trying to find a scrap of warmth in the lonely unforgiving night. Maybe they're pretending that they are a dysfunctional family, united by their isolation from society. He lights up a cig and strolls easy-like to the liquor store around the corner, swinging his arms freely, showing a little swagger.

On the way to the liquor store, he meets the strangest man he has ever met or will ever meet again. SMASH. They bump into each other, the man's coffee rushing up into the air like a volleyball, spilling, burning Redwoods' heavily scarred and tattooed face.

"Watch where you're going, you piece of shit!" Redwoods shouts, picking up the little man by his trench coat and dropping him back on the ground. Redwoods is a tall ex-con with a jail body but the other man is short with long, grizzled hair and a mustache, a chubby little fella with round glasses, maybe sixty years of age, five-foot-six.

"I will," the portly man responds nervously. "I'm sorry sir."

"You got coffee all over my shirt," Redwoods snaps, slapping the old man across the face. The slap is not a *strong* slap. He doesn't want to go too hard at the man. After all, he was just released from jail less than twenty-four hours ago and doesn't want to go back to that mire. Who would want to go back there? The screams of those psychos at night . . .

"Might I bother you for a cigarette, sir?" the old man asks. "I haven't got one on me, I'm afraid. I could use a smoke. I haven't had a cigarette all day."

Redwoods pauses. He takes a few steps back. Some balls on the little man. Took a slap across the face from a tattooed killer and didn't blink an eye. Just asked for a cigarette like it was nothing, like it happened to him every day.

"You're a crazy little man," Redwoods chuckles. "I can't say no to a fellow nut-job, though. I might just be as crazy as you, with just as big of a death wish as you got."

The little man snatches the cigarette Redwoods offers him and lights it up with the eagerness of a baby

sucking on a tit. The old man introduces himself as "Casper." Casper then says he is nervous on this particular night because he has discovered a fact about himself. Something he cannot explain. Something no one can explain.

"*I can't explain it!*" Casper exclaims, tossing his hands up like a shaman praying to the Gods, blowing thick clouds of smoke into the atmosphere. "I just don't know *how* to explain what happened to me today. There is no explanation."

Redwoods laughs. Finally, some entertainment. Jail was boring as hell . . . and sometimes *scary* . . . but sometimes, a muthafucka just gotta catch some entertainment for hisself, don't he?

"What can't you explain old man?" he asks. "What the fuck does an old timer like you got to explain anyways? Haven't you figured this life out by now?"

The old man spits on the ground and shakes his head violently like a rattlesnake preparing its strike. He shoots his tongue out of his mouth and swallows it back in like a lizard.

"No, young buck!" Casper replies energetically. "This is something not even I can explain, with all my damn years!"

Casper explains that he tried to *kill* himself that night. Grabbed his shiny old service revolver from his days in the army and pointed the barrel right at his shiny head. He pulled the trigger. The bullet had entered his skull and exited through the other side. Brains everywhere. Patches of blood, like a Jackson Pollock paintings. Blood smeared against the kitchen walls.

"But I'm still *here*," the old man says. "But I'm still *here*. I don't get why. What the fuck is happening? It's like I can't escape."

Then, he explains that he had emptied two more bullets right into his cranium and the same thing had happened. He had seen his brains splattered against the wall, his blood everywhere, but he had survived. He had rushed to the mirror to take a look. He had found himself still intact.

"I don't get it," the old man says. "I don't get it. I just can't kill myself no matter how hard I try. I just can't commit suicide. I can't leave this city behind."

"Why do you wanna kill yourself anyways?" Redwoods asks him. "You've already lived through the worst of it, right? What else is life going to throw at you? What the fuck else does life even have to give you, dawg?"

"Cancer," the old man replies solemnly. "I'm going to get sick slowly, die slowly. Years of pain. My kids are going to have to see the wick burn down to the wax. I refuse to die that way. I just can't . . . can't kill myself. "

"You want to end this now?" Redwoods asks. "Just kill yourself. Just do it for real. Stop spitting this bullshit at me."

"I *can't*!" the old man screams into the night, his words reverberating down the street, floating over mounds of wood and cloth housing entire families. Redwoods had never heard such an angry scream. "I *just can't*!"

Redwoods shakes his head.

"You're a liar," Redwoods whispers venomously, gazing directly into the old man's eyes with a piercing knife of a cold look. "You don't have the balls to pull the trigger. That's why you floating around these streets, lying to strangers like me. I have better things to do than stand here and listen to this."

The old man tries to take a swing at Redwoods but Redwoods just steps back and pushes the old timer down into a mound of snow face first. The old man rolls over and stares at Redwoods from the ground, his face covered with ice. The old man is crying.

"You're pitiful, Casper," Redwoods hisses. He spits on the old man. "You don't have any balls. You can't even keep your own kids from suffering. You remind me of my old man, before he disappeared and went to live his own life. Just don't bother me with this. Go sleep it off and get sober. Get out of my face."

Casper jumps up to his feet and pulls a service revolver out of his coat. He points the service revolver at his head with a trembling hand. He cocks the gun.

"You want me to do it?" The old man asks, his eyes filled to the brim with a feverish madness. Redwoods remains silent.

"I don't care, old man," Redwoods pronounces coldly. "You do whatever the *fuck* you want to do. I'm going to be on my way. I'm not your damn social worker."

BLAM!

The old man falls to the ground like a collapsing deck of cards. Blood is splattered against the nearby wall. Redwoods is paralyzed. *Holy Jesus. Christ Almighty.* The old man did it. He really did it.

"Holy Jesus," Redwoods whispers to himself. "Holy sweet Jesus Christ. The little bastard really did have balls. He shot himself." He repeats the same phrase a dozen times, standing over the man's body. *Holy Jesus. Holy sweet Jesus. The little bastard really did have balls. Holy Jesus. Holy sweet Jesus. Etc.* Suddenly, Casper raises his head as if to answer him. No sign of a bullet hole, even though his brains are splattered against the wall. Gets up to his feet and shakes his head.

"See, young buck?" Casper sighs. "I just *can't* do it. I can't leave."

Then, the old man brushes past Redwoods and heads into the winter as snow begins to descend from the Heavens. Soon, the snow is everywhere and nothing is visible behind a cold, white wall.

2. BULLY

Milena awoke, shaking the cobwebs loose at seven in the morning. She lifted herself up to rouse her boy, crossing the room to reach the other bed pressed against the opposite wall like a dog huddling in a corner. Rain was slithering down through the pinholes on the roof, accumulating on the gravel floor like maple syrup on pancakes. Darius didn't move when she shook him. He was a little ball, his arms wrapped around his legs like he was going to jump into a lake.

"Darius," she whispered gently. "Get up, baby It's time for school."

Darius roused himself at the sound of his mother's sweet prattle and placed both of his scarred feet on the floor, wincing as the deep, pink cuts touched the stone. Some boys at school had tossed a glass bottle at the ground and made him walk through the shards until his feet were two bloody stumps, two upside-down bloody ice cream cones. Darius walked to the closet and opened it. He found his shirt and slipped it on. His mother helped him slip on his pants and socks.

"Come on, baby," she said, lovingly leading him out of the house. They walked to a stop sign on a deserted road and stood there like two lonely cacti in the middle of the desert. The sun illuminated those trees with an ominous light, half of the trees bathed in a bright golden soup that accented their green leaves and the other half remaining dark. It was as if the sun was tossing its light at the trees at a strange angle, blessing some and dooming others. It was summertime and the mosquitoes swam about the swampy mess of air searching for flesh.

"Don't worry, Darius," she said, passing her thick hands over his black mop-top hair. Each of her fingertips transmitted love. "Everything is goin' to be *all right*, you hear? You my boy. I love you. You gonna have a good day at school today, o.k.? Just don't eat nothin' them kids give you and keep to yourself."

Darius nodded just as a yellow bus appeared around the corner and pulled up to the stop sign. The time for suffering had come for Darius. The bus was full of heartless children, their faces pressed against the bus windows to get a better look at the freak. Milena saw one of the boys pull his window down - a redheaded boy with freckles. The boy began to scream: "We're here to pick up the *retard*! There he is! *Retard*! *Retard*!"

The Bus Driver, Mr. Davis, jumped out of the driver's seat and found the boy. He grabbed the redheaded child by the back of his neck and dragged him out of the bus, the child kicking and screaming like a monkey. Removing his belt, Mr. Davis wrapped it around his right hand to protect his knuckles and punched the redheaded boy in the stomach while Milena sobbed silently and Darius looked on in horror. The redheaded boy doubled over, kneeling on the ground on all fours, his head planted on the grass like a Muslim on a prayer carpet. The boy gasped for breath, his body rising and falling with each breath like an exhausted horse.

"There you go," Mr. Davis pronounced with an air of sadistic satisfaction. "That does it. Have to apologize to you, Ms. Milena. This boy here is Danny Myers. Boy is a truant, a criminal, and a loudmouth who gives me problem all day long! I apologize to you and to your boy there. Ain't nobody deserves to be called a *retard* - even if he *is* one."

Mr. Davis smiled. He was a short, angry, bald man with too much hair on his chest, legs and forearms. He looked like a shiny, hair-covered rock. He was wearing kaki shorts and an open polo shirt with bushes of fur protruding like a hanging garden. He wore a shiny copper whistle around his neck. He would use that whistle to

get the kids in line when they made too much noise.

Turning to Danny Myers, still on the ground, Mr. Davis muttered: "You get your monkey ass up into the bus right fucking now, Myers, if you know what's good for you. Don't want another beatin' there, do ya? You get that bitch ass up to the bus and you apologize to Ms. Milena. You do it or I swear to God you'll catch the *worst* beatin' I ever done gave."

Danny Myers forced himself up from the ground, his head hung low, and dusted off his jeans. Then, he rubbed his palms against his blue shirt, leaving visible trails of sweat and dust. He gazed at Milena and mumbled: "Sorry, Ms. Milena. Sorry about what I done said."

Milena held her son close to her skirt, massaging the boy's face, her head held high. She gazed down at Darius and then turned to Danny Myers like a Roman judge pronouncing a sentence. "Apologize to my son. I want to hear you apologize to my boy, Darius."

Danny Myers took a step back, his eyes wide. He looked at Mr. Davis and Mr. Davis's eyes were wide open too, but he nodded at Danny. Danny turned to Darius and grumbled: "Sorry, Darius. Sorry about what I done said."

"Get your monkey ass on the damn bus," Mr. Davis snapped. "Do it before I get the urge to belt you again. You too, Darius. I'm on a schedule here. Sorry again, Ms. Milena."

Danny Myers ran into the bus and straight to a seat in the back, sinking into himself, trying to stay out of Mr. Davis's line of sight. Darius sat by himself in the front, in a seat reserved especially for him. Mr. Davis smiled at Ms. Milena and then entered the bus like a five-star General returning to his battleship, planting himself onto the driver's seat, pulling a lever that closed the door. The bus disappeared in a cloud of dust.

"You shoulda never gotten that damn boy," a baritone voice sang from behind her. Milena turned to face her brother, DeAngelo. He was a big man with dark skin, wearing a white wife beater to showcase his massive frame. His pants were covered with straw from sleeping in a chicken coop. "That boy ain't *nothin'* you should have messed with, girl. I done told you that years ago, when you done first done got him. Ain't *nobody* wanted that retard."

When Milena didn't answer, DeAngelo continued: "You know it ain't too late, right? You could still give him back. Give him up for adoption. Lot of folks make mistakes. You tried to do good but you ain't got no commitment to it. You could give him back."

Milena shook her head and replied: "No, he *my* boy. I done got him when he was just two years old. Now, he almost ten. He my son and I ain't givin' him to no damn body." Turning to DeAngelo with a stern look, she added: "And I don't need no advice from no nigga livin' in my house, sleeping in my chicken coop for free, eatin' my food for free."

"Ain't no jobs here," DeAngelo replied with a hurt look. "Don't get mean on me just 'cause of what I said. I didn't mean no disrespect. Listen, so you gonna get them nails done today? That's what you said, right? Today bein' your day off, you gotta treat yourself. Gotta enjoy that day off."

"I know I gotta enjoy my day off," she snapped. "Yeah, I'm gonna go get my nails done."

Without saying goodbye, shaking her head, she walked away from DeAngelo like she was leaving a dead body behind her, past her small house, past the bushes aggressively surrounding the home and onto the lonely dirt road behind that house. The dirt road lead her through the dark woods and she gazed up to the tops of the trees, searching around for signs of life. She usually saw one or two deer s when she took this path. On this day, she saw none, not even a squirrel walking around by himself whistling. Just green leaves and bark and angry mosquitoes, huge Midwestern clouds of mosquitoes circling that humid forest like battalions. Eventually, she exited the forest and came upon a hill with a view of downtown. Flashing lights and tall buildings.

That was Flint. Sometimes, you'd be in the woods. Other times, you'd be downtown. Things could change that quickly. New worlds led to other new worlds, all of them interweaving, dancing together like clowns in a carnival. At the bottom of the hill was a four-lane highway and on the other side of the highway stood a small, single-family home with dirty white siding like un-brushed teeth. Milena approached the highway and waited as the cars raced back and forth like a slicing pendulum. Eventually, there was cessation of activity and she moved her feet onto the concrete cautiously, crossing the blackness to the small house with its sign: "Stylish Flint Girl Nail Salon, Professional Nail Services - LADONNA."

The nail shop was owned by a tall, heavily tattooed woman named LaDonna who danced at the Thirsty Point Trucker Bar. Rumors circulated that LaDonna worked as an escort on the side but Milena didn't know the truth and didn't care. People do what they have to do. LaDonna never tried to give her advice, which made the longer walk to *this* nail salon and the higher prices worthwhile.

"What up, girl?" Ladonna asked, approaching with a warm smile. She was wearing scandalous leather pants and a tight leather vest. She wore a push-up bra and her blond hair was held back by a sparkling tiara with pink plastic diamonds. Both of her arms were tattooed with colorful symbols. "Been a long time. Been a long time since you been here."

"My nails be fallin' apart," Milena replied. "Need your services."

"For you, I always got time. How's Darius?"

"He good."

LaDonna gently led her to a small table with two chairs and Milena sat down like a priest preparing himself to hear a confession. LaDonna looked over her nails scientifically and grabbed a nail file from a fanny pack on her wide waist. She carefully filed down Milena's nails, incisively sculpting them into picture-perfect perfect ovals, using a pair of clippers to adjust the longer ones. She used a small brush to brush off nail clippings and placed solution on a cotton ball. LaDonna carefully wiped the nails and used a long metallic tool to clean under the nail tips.

"That redhead idiot boy, Danny Myers," Milena said as LaDonna scraped and cleaned. "He done called Darius a *retard* this morning. Leaned his big Alfalfa head out the window and screamed it out. *Retard!* Just like that. I almost beat his ass my damn self."

"No!" LaDonna exclaimed. "What happened, girl?"

"That hairy bus driver, Mr. Davis, done whipped him. But that ain't even the problem. Mr. Davis ain't there all day. Jesus, that boy gets it all day, come home with cuts, bruises, told me one time some boys collected some dog shit from around the neighborhood and done thrown it at him. Come home *covered* in it. *Covered* in dog shit."

"Jesus. Kids are cruel."

"Yeah, they little *animals*. Was I ever like that? I hope not. Mr. Davis ain't around all the time to hear everything, you know. Hell, I don't know *what* Mr. Davis wouldda done if I ain't been there - probably let them call Darius a *retard*."

"He's over at the titty bar every day, Mr. Davis. Gets three lap dances every night. The Russian women are taking over at the club, taking all the dances from us. Nobody wants an American white girl no more."

"Trust me, sweetie, plenty of black boys would shoot plenty of people for a nice girl like you. Besides, I don't care what Mr. Davis do. I just care if he keep Darius *safe*."

LaDonna paused and looked at Milena.

"You know, that boy has it hard," LaDonna said. "He's white in an all-black school in Flint, and he's mentally handicapped to boot."

"And he's poor," Milena said. "Poor, white with a black mama, in an all-black school in Flint, and he's mentally retarded. Jesus, Lord God didn't give that boy *no chance* in life. If he lives to fifteen, it'll be a miracle."

"You ever think about giving him back? Back to the orphanage?"

"*Never*. He my son."

LaDonna continued working until she had removed all of the dirt from Milena's masculine fingertips. She washed the nails with a rag and a water bottle and began to paint, carefully tracing the simple design on each nail. It was like a wave, red and white. LaDonna traced the red on each nail and then the white. As LaDonna worked, her husband, a tall black youth entered the room. LaDonna was thirty-nine but in good shape and her husband, LeRoy, was twenty-four. LeRoy was going to college, studying to be a dental assistant. His face was bruised. His lips looked like deployed airbags.

"Well, hello, Mr. Sunshine. What done happened to you?" Milena asked.

"He got beat up by some of them cats who work at the electrical store out there, close to downtown. Boy with a hoodie, with a cut over his eye, Denny or Denil or something like that. He has them skinny boys and that strong one with him all day, sittin' outside the store, listening to music on the boom box. He was walking by and they beat him up for no reason."

"You call the police?"

"No way, girl. They would burn this place down if I did that."

LeRoy shook his head and said: "If I wasn't a student, tryin' to make somethin' of myself, I'd shoot them niggas dead. I'd pop *bullets* into each of them. Watch them bleed."

"Don't talk crazy," LaDonna snapped. "You don't need *no trouble*."

LaDonna finished painting Milena's nails and placed Milena's fingers inside a gold yellow tub of acidic solution. They sat in silence, listening to the fan spin like a hamster wheel. The television was on in the corner and the President was talking about job creation, giving the audience an optimistic thumbs up. LaDonna pulled Milena's hand out of the tub angrily and blew on her fingers. Then, she let Milena's fingers fall back into the tub. The door swung open and a skinny white girl with bright blue hair walked in holding hands with another girl with short black hair. LaDonna shook her head disapprovingly.

Both girls were sixteen. The blue-haired girl was Polly, LaDonna's rebellious, disrespectful daughter. Her daddy was a trucker named Ned from Illinois who had stopped over in Flint for one night and had left the next day never to come back. LaDonna received a check from him every so often but they rarely talked and he never came to see Polly. The other girl, Tamsy, was Polly's two-year girlfriend. The two girls sat on a couch next to each other, holding hands near the television without saying a word. Polly was pale with long legs and pink socks tucked inside black tennis shoes. She was wearing a shirt with glued-on rhinestones spelling "L'amour." Tamsy was wearing a hoodie, long workpants, and leather boots despite the fact that it was close to ninety degrees outside. Her face was covered with oily acne and she wore a pair of thin-framed glasses with thick lenses.

The President's sweaty face was pressed up against the television screen. They could see the pores of his nose, the creases over his eyes, his bushy rabbit eyebrows, his glossy mannequin ears. He was speaking about growing up in a small town in the Midwest, living with his grandparents. His parents had died when he was young. Then, he went into a discussion about economic growth, joblessness. He emphasized every word with a thunderous jab. Occasionally, he would adjust his tie nervously, his hands twitching like a junkie's palms. He had a long, yellow tie and a neat, carefully-crafted suit like those they sell at the rich people's malls in the suburbs. His

hair was slicked back. The network interrupted his speech to run shoe commercials.

"Where you girls been at?" LaDonna shouted, turning her head like a komodo dragon towards Polly, her eyes filled with fire and brimstone. "You know I ain't like it when you skip school, you little bitches. You know you're supposed to be there. You get your *asses* back to school, *now*."

"I ain't goin' to school no more," Polly replied, shaking her head back and forth. "All they do at that school is call me names all day. *Bitch. Lesbo. Bitch. Lesbo*. All day *long*, I hear it. *Bitch, lesbo. Bitch, lesbo*. Over and over again. *Bitch. Lesbo. Bitch. Lesbo*."

"Well, you is a *lesbo*," Milena interjected roughly. Sometimes, she lacked tact. "I mean, it ain't nice to have folks pointin' it out but that's what you is, right? Nothing wrong with that."

"Nobody asked you nothin', nigger," Tamsy muttered, her eyes watering. A solitary tear ran down her face and splattered onto the coffee table, near a soda can. "You don't know what its like to be us, to have the other kids torture you all day for no reason. You don't know. You don't be callin' us nothin', you nigger."

"What's that? Could you repeat that please? Say it again, bitch. Can you say it again?" Milena asked, resisting the urge to stand up and beat the girl right then and there. "Did you just call me a *nigger*? I want hear it. Say it again. Say it *clearly*."

"I'm sorry," LaDonna said, stroking Milena's hand affectionately. "Please don't pay no never mind. She don't mean nothin' by it. She's just ignorant. Stupid."

"I hear you say the word 'nigger' again, you gonna get messed up *bloody*," LeRoy said, his head held high. "I ain't gonna let you be with my daughter-in-law if you keep up with them ignorant comments. You gonna get checked *real* quick."

"Well, she is a *nigger* ain't she? I mean, that's what she is?" Tamsy protested. "She's a nigger with a retarded son. Everybody calls that boy BSE, for 'burned scrambled eggs' 'cause his brains is all scrambled and his mama is black but he's white underneath it all, all burned up. *Burned scrambled eggs*."

Before LaDonna could stop her, Milena had risen and raced over to the couch like a tiger racing over the Indian grass toward a villager. She had grabbed a broom with her claws. The broom had been leaning against the

couch. She swung it hard, the broom snapping over Tamsy's head like chicken bones exploding in a hungry dog's mouth. Polly screamed as the blood burst forth from Tamsy's pumpkin-sized skull. Tamsy swayed back and forth like a dizzy drunk, falling off the couch and standing up again like a target in a shooting range.

"You go to hell," Tamsy shouted, her hands on her massive skull, blood trickling down her face. "You and your retarded son. You go to *hell*."

Milena walked back to where she had been sitting and LaDonna apologized to her again, holding back nervous tears. LaDonna hated violence. She should have been used to it by now. She had seen it her whole life. Milena's nails were dry enough for her to leave. LaDonna tried to ease tensions by commenting on the nails.

"Gosh, they look real nice, girl," LaDonna said. "I did a real good job. Listen, I'm real sorry for all this trouble. No charge, o.k.? You get this one for free. We're cool, *right*? I wouldn't want to lose a loyal customer. You come back *any time* and don't be paying no attention to these girls. They're annoying, you know."

Milena sighed, placed her hands on her hips and said, "Yeah, baby. We cool. I know it ain't your fault. You can't control every piece of trash that come into your place. I ain't mad at you. You still my friend."

LaDonna, Leroy, Polly and Tamsy (her head still bleeding profusely, tears now streaming down her eyes) watched as Milena pushed open the glass door to the shop. They watched through the glass as she walked to the highway and waited, patiently, for all the traffic to pass and crossed the highway, heading back up the trail to her house. She looked so lonely that even Tamsy felt pain in her cold heart.

3. WORK

The sweet science. The hitting and moving, its like a dance. It reflects the rhythm of life, the need to transcend and rise above it all, to face the worst circumstances and come out ahead. I showed up at the Warrior's Gym with thoughts of Muhammad Ali in my simple mind. "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee. Rumble young man, rumble." I had images in mind of Ali standing in front of the cameras, screaming because he *chose* to be a Muslim, because he *chose* to be loud - and no one could tell Ali that he should be anyone different from who he was.

Wentworth was an old-school black nationalist who hated me from the first moment he saw me. He had a head full of grey hair and walked around like he owned the place. As it turned out, he had never trained a champion. Why are the cats who walk around like they're the *best* usually the cats who have no reason to walk around like that?

"Is this the way to the Boxing Club?" I asked, ascending a staircase from the standard gym on the first floor to the boxing gym on the second.

"Yeah, what you wanna do in there?" He asked me gruffly. "You lookin' for someone?"

"I want to box," I responded. "I'm interested in boxing."

He laughed and gave me a smirk, like I wasn't the shit his dog had eaten and thrown up.

"*Sure*," he said, full of sarcasm, "maybe I'll see something in *you*. You look like a boxer."

Then, he descended the stairs like a vampire going into his lair and disappeared into thin air. Wentworth's mean, dismissive mentality was reflected by the rest of that gym. No one thought much of me to tell you the truth. Darren Johnson was the only one in that crowd who said he saw potential in me. Darren was a hustler and he knew I was a lawyer, and he required my services.

"I have labor beef," Darren said to me one day, swinging his dreadlocks out of his face like vines on a tree shaken by a storm. "My union is filled with old white guys and they want to kick me out. You know the type."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Just show up with me," he said. "Show up and they will think I am serious. That I have a lawyer. They'll drop in their pants. I trust you, man."

I agreed to take on Darren's case and he agreed to train me, standing in front of me holding the mitts while I pounded away, always tired, unable to keep up. Regardless of how many sit-ups I did, how many weights I lifted, my body looked different from the other boxer's bodies. They had fantastic abs, muscles well-defined, faces like real pugilists. Me? My black chest hair looks strange against my pale skin. My nose is big and curved - like a banana ready to be smashed to pieces. My stomach is flat but without any well-defined little hills and valleys. I work out hard without the same results. I was *never* going to take this boxing thing anywhere and I knew it.

In the ring, I was a disaster. I'm proud to say that I am brave, that I stood up to the toughest guys and swung away - but I also have to admit that they always patted me on the head in the end and gave me a I'm-better-than-you-but-I'm-a-good-sportsman smile and a "good job, buddy." Needless to say, I had no future as a boxer. I don't think there has ever been an amateur boxer, however, who has taken more hits to the head than I have. I took *a lot* of hits to the head.

I boxed a tall fireman who whipped my ass across the ring, a short lightweight I held my own against, and a Mexican kid a little smaller than me who beat the shit out of me like I had stolen his lunch, among other fighters. But I never went down. Not once. Before the Mexican kid and I had completed the second round, an old coach stopped the fight and announced that I "didn't know nothin' about fighting." Covered with blood, in the bathroom, one of the other coaches patted me on the head and told me the human brain isn't meant to get knocked like that.

Nobody took me seriously. Not one damn person. I would go downtown and drink at the bars with the other boxers, go to the Golden Gloves finals in Grand Rapids, always making appearances but never really accepted. An outsider. The Mexican kid who had beaten me up so bad ended up getting knocked out in the first round in the Gloves. Showed how good of a boxer *he* was - and *he* had been able to whip my ass silly.

I ended up going to the labor union with Darren on a cold winter day, skipping out on work to show up at the small office in rural Michigan. I could see my own breath as I jumped out of my Jeep and skipped over a divider in the parking lot. Darren was already inside, sitting down nervously. I informed the secretary that Mr. Johnson's lawyer had arrived, adjusted my tie and sat down next to Darren. I assured him that everything was going to be o.k. and tried to help him calm down. He was so nervous he kept thumping his feet against the wooden floorboards covered by a thin grey carpet, biting his lower lip, twiddling his thumbs.

"We'll be fine, Darren," I said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

We were taken into a small room. There was a long table surrounded by chairs, the type of room you would expect parents to gather in for a PTA meeting. The lawyer for the union seemed civil, placing a tape into a machine and pressing the "rec" button like God squishing a sinner with a giant finger, introducing the case like Moses reading the Ten Commandments. The other members of the union board looked like the sort of people who

would hate Darren Johnson. Darren wasn't the type of black man that old white guys like these liked. He wasn't a nice black guy who spoke in African-American English, always deferential, like some sort of Southern Gospel singer. Darren was *himself*, dreadlocks and crazy talk. Six foot nine, tall and skinny. A science fiction fan who sat on the couch in his luxurious home with his feet up on the coffee table, his foster kids running around, knocking each other over like bowling pins.

"This is the case of the union council versus Darren Johnson," the union lawyer announced, bending his body over the tape recorder like the Hunchback of Notre Dame preparing himself to pull the ropes on the bells. I remember wondering why they couldn't record the meeting onto a CD or a computer. One of the old men on the council kept staring at me with distrust, his eyes filled with a hot, blinding hate. He was a fat man with his hair slicked back and a huge mustache covering his wide dragon mouth. Another fellow seemed kinder, his heart less filled with venomous hate but weak enough to be controlled by the fat man. The fat man was there to *execute* Darren, to string him up.

"Mr. Johnson is accused of various infractions against the union, including failing to show up on various dates without calling in sick, as well as failing to disclose the fact that he was being billed at a higher rate," the union lawyer continued. "We are here to determine whether Mr. Johnson should be suspended from the union for these failures."

I presented my case like a solid, passionate lawyer. I could tell the union lawyer was impressed by my eloquent exposition of the issues, my grasp of language and my knowledge of the facts. Darren hadn't been guilty of failing to disclose the fact that he had been billed at a higher rate - the rate he was being billed at wasn't that much higher than his regular rate, per paycheck at least. Darren's wife had always handled his paychecks. He couldn't be bothered with things like that. As talented a welder as he was, loving the outdoors, feeling at home on construction sites suspended over three hundred feet into the air, he preferred to spend his free time going to Pistons games down in Detroit. He was a regular guy.

How could he know that the fucking union was billing him out at a couple dollars more than he was supposed to receive per paycheck? The foreman had provided us with an affidavit, swearing up and down like a

Jehovah's Witness that the mistake had been made by the company - *not* by Darren Johnson. Darren wasn't the sort of person who would steal a couple bucks per paycheck. He didn't need the money. His properties and his working wife, and the money he received to raise a half-dozen foster kids, were more than enough for him to live on. He had a sports car and a mansion of a home with an elevator to take you from the first to the second floor.

Aside from the foreman, Darren had other witnesses who stated that Darren had never misrepresented his wage rate to anyone. He had *clearly stated* his job, made sure everyone understood what he was doing and how much he should receive. It didn't matter. From the second we had walked, I knew the fat man was going to dominate the entire thing like a violent sumo wrestler dominating a less bulky opponent. I imagined the fat man sitting around with his drinking buddies somewhere in Flint, at a bar filled with drunks, guzzling down beers over their corpulent bellies, laughing about Darren Johnson.

"*Fuck that nigger*," I could hear them say in my head. "Piece of shit had dreadlocks like he thought he was Bob Marley." Not a good negro. Not a thug. Just a hard-working, construction-loving individualist married man with a strange way of speaking and an obsession with science fiction and boxing. More of a Muhammad Ali than a Floyd Patterson or Sonny Liston.

The union's verdict came weeks after I had proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was no way Darren Johnson had intentionally misrepresented his wage rate. They sent a letter to my office. I opened the letter and read the words: "MR. DARREN JOHNSON HAS BEEN TERMINATED FROM HIS MEMBERSHIP WITH THE UNION." I was sitting at my desk across from Betty, our sexy, doe-eyed, 19-year-old, light-brown-skinned, full-figured Dominican secretary. She was talking to one of the women in our other offices, on the phone. I knew most of the office staff hated me, saw me as a corporate man who could never seem to match his overcoat and pants and tie. Jesus, style is not my forte.

Betty had hated me at first but took to flirting with me regularly. I felt that if I had wanted to date her, I could have, but that I might lose *my job* . . . plus, she could sue the company for harassment, even if the whole affair had been voluntary for both of us. As hard as it was to look at her, beautiful, smiling and self-confident, sexy with her soft Spanish accent, her innocence and good soul - *I stayed away*, refused to engage on a romantic level.

She would toss me furtive glances, small smiles, parade in front of me in her tight spandex pants. I would pretend not to notice, putting my head down, focusing on my paperwork.

Maybe she *knew* that I was attracted to her and she was playing games with me? On the day I received the letter from the union with the verdict, she had straightened her hair, was wearing knee-length leather boots and a dress that showcased her figure. Her teeth were so white and perfect she looked like a movie star.

"They denied Darren," I told her. "I showed them everything and they didn't see it. They didn't want to see it. They let him go."

"They fired him?" she asked, flicking her long dark eyelashes flirtatiously.

"Yeah," I said, grabbing my coat. "They fired him."

I walked out. I couldn't stand being at work anymore. You can't be your self anywhere anymore. Nobody tells the truth. If the truth *doesn't matter*, what the hell does?

4. NOBODY DOOM AND BULLET MEET JUNIOR AND JENNY

Bullet is driving along a road, not a thing in sight. Nothing but trees and more trees, beautiful green trees like in a Tarzan film. They seem to stretch up forever into an empty, soulless blue desert terrain populated by fluffy, white carcasses and bones and strange echoes. That sky, that lonely sky. It was watching him.

"I need to find a place to sleep," he says to himself, wiping the sweat off his brow with his sleeve. He has been on the road for too long now. Too many hours on the road have a tendency to make a man start tearing at his own flesh. "I can't sleep in this truck no more. My back is killing me. I'm falling apart."

Bullet had fallen into the habit of talking to himself on these long trips along his sales route. Not just the occasional comment. Complex conversations in the cabin of his pickup truck. Politics. Religion. Just about everything under the sun. He discourses at length, exposing his point of view and correcting himself when he makes a mistake. Who is he speaking to? No one. *Nobody*, actually. But *Nobody Doom* is a person, someone he has imagined, a man with a long cloak over a suit and tie. He is a little man who looks like an accountant standing

there, staring at him intently, waiting for his next comment, hair neatly combed. Occasionally, Nobody Doom makes some stupid comment in reply to Bullet's discourse and Bullet has to reach over to the passenger side of the cabin and slap him. Nobody Doom's imaginary head flies back and hits the glass behind them.

There is no reason for an imaginary person to say anything, *is there?* Who is going to listen to someone who *doesn't really exist?* The best thing to do when you are an imaginary person is to stay nice and quiet, with your hands on your lap, listening. Bullet comments to Nobody Doom that if he were an imaginary person, he would keep his *mouth shut*. No imaginary person knows anything about the real world. That's what Bullet is saying when they come across Jenny Stanhope standing in the middle of the road with her arms raised towards the sky, praying to the clouds. She is bleeding, wearing some kind of a nightgown with dots, ripped to shreds by a wild beast freed from the zoo. She has long blonde hair and her eyes are as wild as a voodoo doll's. But they *don't see her*. Neither Bullet nor Nobody Doom. They are too busy discoursing. Bullet has reached over to give Nobody Doom an imaginary slap. Nobody has lifted his imaginary arms to protect himself. Bullet is facing Nobody, screaming at him: "I wish you would keep your *damn mouth shut*, you piece of *shit!* *You don't even exist!* If I didn't exist, I would keep my mouth closed! Why speak when you don't exist? *Just listen! Just listen!* There's no reason to say a damn thing if you don't exist."

BAAAAM!

They hit Jenny Stanhope and she goes flying, soaring several feet into the air like a tennis ball, landing farther down the road, bouncing. Several hundred feet away. She flies a long, long distance and dives down into the concrete like a swan. The car comes to a halt and Bullet leaves the truck, leaving Nobody Doom behind. "*Oh my God! Oh my God!*" Bullet repeats to himself. "Jesus, God, please tell me she's o.k. Don't let her die, God. Please don't let her die."

Out of a deep ditch along the side of the road, a short brown-haired man with freckles jumps out onto the road like a frog onto a lily pad. The short man is holding his head, crying convulsively. His nose is like an albatross's orange beak. "My goodness," the little man sobs, "my goodness gracious. Poor Jenny Stanhope. Poor Jenny. You killed Jenny!"

Bullet doesn't want to approach the woman's body. Has he just committed homicide? It would be the first time. He dreams about killing people - his boss at the company. Strangling his boss. My God, the joy he would feel! This is the first time he has actually taken a person's life, extinguished the flame of someone's existence.

"Who was she?" Bullet asks, turning to the little man. "Did you know her?"

"Oh my goodness," the little man cries, "she was my wife. She was my Jenny. You killed her! You killed my Jenny!"

An impenetrable silence is raised between them, pierced only by the occasional cries of the predatory birds of the lonely woods. They are hungry, these birds. Finally, when it seems like the silence will consume them in its infinite hunger, Bullet decides to break it with the decisive hammer of his unforgiving voice.

"We better get yer woman inside the vehicle," he says. "Better get her remains into town, try to explain this mess."

The little man nods. Introduces himself as "Junior." Bullet and Junior walk down the road to the body, pick up the broken remains and carry them to the truck. They deposit her in the back and enter the vehicle. It will be a long drive to the next town. They will have to drive fast for, if they drive too slowly, the predatory birds could fly onto the truck bed and rip Jenny Stanhope to pieces. Her face has been preserved for the funeral, despite the nature of the accident. Her legs have been bent backwards and her arms are a bloody mess. She looks like a rag doll tossed around the backyard by an angry, unfed, rabid dog. Her arms look like chicken wings in a bucket.

"Why were you out there in the middle of nowhere?" Bullet asks. "She came running out onto the middle of the street like a madwoman. I could never have seen her. No damn way."

Junior lowers his head and stares at his own feet. "I was trying to kill her," he whispers. "I wanted her dead."

"You were trying to *kill her*?" Bullet asks, without diverting his eyes from the solitary road. It is about midday now and the sun is scorching his eyes. He can barely see, but he refuses to blink, takes the pain, lets the drops of sweat fall into his eyes, stinging them, lets the sunlight *pierce* his cornea. Pain strengthens a man, gets him ready for the bad pain to come. Life will throw more pain his way but he'll be ready for it. He'll become like

steel. Impenetrable. He's from Flint, where every man has to learn to kill his own heart.

Junior mutters: "The bitch cheated on me so many times. Time after time after time after time. You understand?"

Bullet remains silent. Keeps driving. Just keeps driving. Nobody Doom is sitting between Bullet and Junior. Nobody Doom is humming a song. Some tune expressing disbelief and hatred, loneliness. Each note seems to announce that the end of the world must be coming.

"Why were you trying to kill her?"

"I already said it!" Junior screams. "Weren't you listening? She cheated on me! Time after time after time! She didn't respect me! I had no choice. And then . . . she was pregnant with another man's baby! She was going to have another man's baby."

She ran out to the middle of the road to escape, Nobody Doom pronounces calmly. Now, he wants us to take the rap. The two of us will go to jail. Do you understand, Bullet?

"Shut up," Bullet murmurs under his breath. "You shut up. No one wants to listen to an imaginary person. I told you before. You don't have nothin' to say to nobody."

"What?" Junior asks, his voice a shrill whistle. "What in damnation is you goin' on about, boy? Is you crazy? What you talkin' about?"

"Nothin'," Bullet snaps. "Just keep your mouth shut until we get to town. Then, I'll drop you off and leave you behind."

Junior shrinks into his corner and swallows his tongue. Twenty minutes to the next town. Air conditioner broken. Everybody sweating in that cabin, breathing the same stale air. The air is perfectly still, as thick as motor oil.

This beastly dog is going to make us take the rap, Nobody Doom whispers, about halfway to town. The two of us will be the ones who will end up in jail. Do you know what they will do to us in jail, Bullet? Men who kill women? Who kill pregnant women?

"What would you have me do?" Bullet whispers. "What?!"

Pull over and take the revolver out of the glove compartment, Nobody Doom says, taking off his spectacles, polishing them against his cloak. Take this guy out. He's a murderer. Who cares about his life? He's worthless.

"I can't do that," Bullet replies, shaking his head. "I just can't do that! Can I? Can I?"

"Who are you talking to, man?" Junior shouts, banging on the windshield with his fists. "Have you gone crazy? Who the fuck are you talking to, man?" Bullet shakes his head.

"You're the one who is a killer," Bullet finally responds.

"What was I supposed to do?" Junior asks, exasperated, placing his hands against his cavernous face. He looks like a skull with hair glued onto his dome. "Just keep taking her disrespect? Watch my wife give birth to another man's baby? Besides . . . you're the one who actually done the killin', ain't you? You're the one who hit her with your car!"

Junior laughs, his entire body trembling with pleasure. He smiles a crooked smile behind a pepper red goatee. His teeth have holes and stains and his tongue is blue. A lizard's tongue? Don't some lizards have blue tongues? Maybe a dead man's tongue?

"You the sucker that actually done the killin'!" Junior continues laughing, laughing a deathly cough. "I'm the one who wanted to take the bitch out and you the one who did all my dirty work for me! I ain't got to do nothin' but watch you hang."

Junior doubles over, laughing. Suddenly, a scream is heard from the truck bed. A woman is banging against the glass behind them, shouting. Her eyes are on fire.

"Jenny!" Junior shouts. "Oh my God, Jenny! She's alive!"

"You son of a bitch!" Jenny is screaming, through the glass. "You crazy son of a bitch! You tried to kill me! And your baby! You tried to kill your baby!"

Junior stares at Bullet but Bullet refuses to stare back. Keeps his eyes fixed on the road.

"That baby ain't mine," Junior stammers, still gazing at Bullet intently. Then turning around like a wolf ready to strike, shouting at Jenny through the glass: "You whore from Babylon! I know that that baby ain't mine!"

"It's your baby! It might be dead now!"

"Lying succubus," Junior yells. Then, turning to Bullet: "Pull this car over, man. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's a liar."

He's going to kill her now, Nobody Doom whispers into Bullet's ear. He's going to grab her by the throat and he's going to kill her. And we're the ones who will take the rap it. We're going to die in jail.

"Pull over!" Junior screams, flailing his arms, kicking the dash. "Pull over! Pull over! Pull over! I need to kill this woman! She has to die!"

SCREECH! Car comes to a halt. Bullet parks in the middle of the road and unlocks the doors. The man hesitates, searching Bullet's face. Jenny is trying to stand up, but her legs keep giving out underneath her. She keeps falling over, crashing against the glass. Bullet looks out of his window as Junior jumps out. There is a coyote watching them with interest from behind one of the bushes. He opens the glove compartment, grabs the revolver and exits the vehicle.

Good! Nobody is shouting. Kill him!

Jenny has rolled out of the truck bed and is dragging herself along the highway while Junior follows her, laughing and kicking her sides, calling her a "whore," spitting on her.

"I loved you," Junior cries. "I fucking loved you. And you treated me like shit. You succubus!"

Bullet is shaking his head. After firing the four shots that resolve the situation, Bullet reenters the truck and begins driving again. He sighs. A nice, calming silence. Not a stifling silence that swallows you and hurts your heart. The sort of silence that you *enjoy*. The sort of silence that makes you smile. Bullet is smiling now. He should never take these deliveries outside the city. Flint is dangerous but these rednecks are insane.

Why didn't you kill them? Nobody Doom asks, his imaginary hands grabbing at the air in front of him, strangling an imaginary throat imagined by an imaginary man. *Why didn't you kill them? Why did you let them go? You should have killed them.*

Bullet had shot Junior in the legs. Two bullets for each leg. Four shots. Enough to make sure he isn't going to be chasing Jenny around, trying to kill her. Enough to make sure that he doesn't die, that he just waits for the

ambulance.

"We're going to the next town," Bullet states. "When we get there, I'm going to use a payphone and call 9-1-1 to get that couple an ambulance. That stupid cracker was too excited and stupid to remember the plates on this truck and we'll be back in Flint within a couple hours."

You should have killed them, Nobody Doom hisses. I should have liked to see them begging for their lives. Holes in their heads. Dying in the woods, eaten by the coyotes. My God! What a beautiful sight!

Bullet sighs. Everyone's a critic. Even an imaginary man.

"Nobody Doom," Bullet finally says. "My dear friend. I think our association is at an end."

Bullet fires at Nobody's imaginary head. No blood. No guts. Nobody Doom simply disappears and the bullet shatters the passenger side window, flying into the woods. How long would that bullet continue flying into those woods before hitting a tree? The shards of glass fly onto the road behind him like snowflakes. He was himself again.

5. ALL TIED UP

"*He late again!*" she said, taking a drag off her cigarette, staring at the hideous skyline - those needle-like, piercing edifices stabbing at the polluted sky, cutting the clouds. Factory after factory. She looked at Raylene and added: "Can you believe it?"

Raylene was smaller than Georgia, much quieter, the sort of girl who was teased by the other girls and had to find a protector. Few girls could be described as being as "big" as Georgia (sometimes known at school as "Big Georgia," in fact). Big Georgia was five-nine and weighed two hundred pounds. She could bench her own weight.

They were on the rooftop together, standing over Georgia's apartment - a place where her dad, Baxie, rolled his massive joints, drank his tall glasses of whisky, and made sweet love to Georgia's mother, Tracy, when he wasn't in the mood to throw rocks at kids walking by on the sidewalk. Georgia's mother liked to scream when Baxie made love to her, speaking in tongues, channeling some kind of inner demon from another universe into her

body. Georgia listened to all these exclamations sitting in her room, turning up her stereo to drown out the sounds. She didn't mind them too much, though. It was better to listen to people making love than hearing them tear each other apart.

At some point, Georgia had met Karl and they had started dating to pass the time. Georgia had just turned eighteen when they met and was now nineteen. Karl was thirty-five with a shaved head, pale skin, a pot belly. He sagged his pants, liked droopy XXL t-shirts. He looked like a fat pale donkey. Georgia and Raylene, who was only fourteen, were standing on the rooftop of a building waiting for Karl, talking about music and the weather. Georgia was pacing back and forth when she heard a car park in front of her three story brick building.

Klank-Klang-Klank-Klang. That was the sound Karl's car would make, like a crazy drummer. Klank-Klang-Klank-Klang. She had told him a million times to get it checked but Karl didn't have the money. He would use the money on shoes if he did. He loved shoes. Karl could dance and that was why she loved him. In the middle of the winter, cold as witch's backside out there, and he would start dancing as soon as he heard a beat on the radio.

"Silly fool," she whispered to herself affectionately, approaching the edge of the building to look down to the driveway. She stood on the edge so that if Raylene had wanted to kill her all she would have to do was throw a little pebble at her, put her off balance - but Raylene needed her protector, needed a big girl to let all the other girls in the neighborhood know that she wasn't one to be messed with. Sometimes, Georgia was rude and tough, but being bullied by one girl was preferable to being bullied by an entire legion of equally vicious deadly beings.

She looked down at the gravel driveway but she didn't see Karl getting out of that green car like he usually did, pushing open the rusty doors and exiting butt first. No, this was a different man altogether. Same vehicle, different man. *This* man was in his fifties, blond, buzz haircut, obese. *This* man wore glasses, big glasses like no one wore anymore, with gold frames and big lenses shaped like two upside-down mountains. He had a mustache and a short-sleeved button-up shirt, a black clip-on tie and a big gold watch. He was wearing kakis and shiny black shoes.

The obese man waved up at them with a meaty hand, smiling.

"Howdy!" he called out in his deep voice. "How is everything? My name is Mr. Jackson."

"Why you got Karl's car?" Georgia yelled back. "Where Karl at?"

The obese man seemed to turn a deep shade of red. His pants were too short, like they had shrunk in the wash. He placed two hands on his black belt, leaned back on his heels like an arrogant pirate on a ship.

"Well," he said, nervously. "I'm afraid something has happened to our friend Mr. Karl."

"What happened to Karl? Where Karl at?"

"Well," Mr. Jackson drawled like a Baptist preacher. "You see, its like this . . . Karl had a heart attack and he had to get rushed to the hospital. Why don't you let me in and we can talk about it?"

Georgia looked back at Raylene and Raylene nodded, indicating that she thought it was a good idea to let the obese man in. Raylene felt herself get warmer, a sense of pride invading her modest heart. She liked it when Georgia asked her opinion about things. Georgia turned back to the man with the tie and looked him over. He was smiling, his hands in his pockets. He was rocking back and forth on his feet. She leaned over the edge of the house and shouted: "*All right.*"

Then she walked to the door leading into the building, climbing down over a set of wood steps held together by rusty nails. The building had three floors, each floor a separate apartment. Georgia's apartment was on the third floor. The windows of each floor were boarded up and protected with bars. The front door led to a set of concrete steps falling down onto the street. There, at the bottom of the steps, stood the curious fat man, his hands still in his endless pockets, his face frozen in the same uneasy icy smile.

"Come in."

The man lumbered up the steps and walked into the house after her, swaying from side to side at each step. By the time they had reached the third floor, the man was panting heavily. He knelt down in the hallway, right outside of Georgia's door, and took a few moments before rising back to his feet and gazing at Georgia sheepishly.

"Age," the obese man explained. "Used to be a lot more nimble. Time you get worn down and old like me, it falls apart. Now, I don't think I could run fifty feet much the less one mile. Used to be a runner, if you can believe that."

"Right," Georgia replied sarcastically. She unlocked the top lock, then the middle lock, and, finally, the lock on the knob, deftly switching between the three keys as she worked her way down. She pushed the door open and invited the old man in.

"Thank you," the man replied, lumbering his way into the home.

Raylene had been standing on the stairway leading to the roof, watching the old man enter the apartment, and she followed him in. She smiled at Georgia submissively as she passed her. After Raylene had entered the apartment, Georgia walked in and slammed the door behind her aggressively.

"Where Karl at?" She screamed. *"Tell me where he at."*

The old man, now sitting down comfortably on the couch like a medieval king, leaned back, surprised by the volume of her voice. He threw a smile at Raylene, sitting on a wood chair in the corner, near a window, and then redirected his glance back at Georgia. He reached into his shirt pocket, removed a shiny metal flask and unscrewed the top. He took a drink from the flask and then screwed the top back on and slipped it back into his shirt pocket.

"Listen," he said, "I don't want to scare you, but Karl had himself a heart attack. He was driving along the highway there on I-95 and his car stopped. It was about ten in the morning so traffic was real light. He pulled over to the shoulder and I was behind him, so I figured somethin' was wrong. I pulled up behind him and parked the car right behind his. Then, I climbed out of the car and went to his car to see what was going on. He was slumped in the front seat, like he was dead, but he was gasping so I knew he was alive."

"Oh my God," Raylene muttered. "Is he o.k.?"

"So, the ambulance came," the man continued, "and they took him to the hospital. I followed them and went to his room. I asked him what I should do and he told me to come and get you."

The man stopped to look at Georgia and Raylene. Raylene looked at Georgia and Georgia looked at Raylene. Then, both of the women turned to look at the man. He was smiling that same, steady but uneasy, icy smile. His teeth were a dark yellow, some of them almost black. His nails were yellow and unkempt. His eyes were red, like he'd been crying all day.

"So, why you come here in *his* car?" Georgia asked. "Why you not come in your car?"

The man's eyes widened and he started forward, as if he hadn't expected the girls to ask him any questions. He grabbed for the flask and unscrewed the top, took another drink, and placed the flask back in the pocket. He smiled that same yellow smile.

"Not sure," he replied, his hands trembling. "Guess I just figured that you would feel more comfortable. Just seemed like the thing to do. Maybe he said something about it."

Eventually, the man convinced Georgia and Raylene to enter the car and drive with him to the hospital. They proceeded through the streets, passing boarded-up house after boarded-up house, the fallen snow still on the ground. The old man trembled as he drove and his car stunk of cat urine.

"He's an interesting one, that Karl," the man said. "He ever say anything about his beliefs?"

"His *beliefs*?" Georgia asked in reply. "What kind of *beliefs*?"

"Oh, just about whether he is a *Christian* or *atheist*, *communist* or *capitalist*. You know, his *beliefs*? Everyone has a set of beliefs they subscribe to, right? I myself am an atheist. I like a philosopher by the name of Heidegger. I also like Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre."

"I ain't never heard of any of them. When we gettin' to the hospital?"

"We'll be getting there real soon. Real soon."

The man slowed as he approached a red light, coming to a stop behind a black van. The street was empty aside from the van. From a side street, a stretch limousine stopped to the left of Karl's Green Oldsmobile. Georgia looked at the Limo.

"Why is that limo stopping beside us?" Raylene asked. "The red light is up there."

"Maybe he wants to take a look at some pretty girls," the man replied. He shot a smile to Raylene. "I've got two pretty ones in the car with me right now, don't I? Two sexy girls."

"*You just drive and keep your damn mouth shut*," Georgia snapped. "We don't need no old man to tell us who pretty and who ain't. Just take me to see Karl and *keep your mouth shut*."

A second limousine left the same side street and came to a stop beside the green Oldsmobile on the right

side. The two limousines were identical. Georgia craned her neck to see the drivers, gazing at one limousine and then the next, but the glass was tinted on both.

"Oh my God," Raylene said. "He's gonna kill us. This was all a trap."

The two doors of the work van in front of them swung open, revealing a swarm of men in cheap suits and ties of various hues. While Raylene shrunk into herself and cried, Georgia puffed her chest out and tried to stay calm. She tried to count the number of men approaching the car. Six, maybe seven. They were dressed like salesmen. One of them, wearing a green blazer and black slacks with a red tie knocked on the driver's side window.

"Hi, Phil," Mr. Jackson sang, flashing the other man a yellow smile. "You here to pick up our passengers? They're a pack of good girls these two but - " (he paused to toss a look at Georgia and then turned back to the man at the window) "- watch out for the big girl 'cause she looks like she's a cranky one. Don't want any of the guys to get embarrassed gettin' beat up by a girl now do we?"

The man at the window with the red tie smiled and opened the driver's side door. Mr. Jackson exited the car and walked up to the work van, getting inside through the back, sitting down inside the van. The man with the red tie walked to the other side of the Oldsmobile and opened the passenger side door and the back passenger door almost simultaneously. The other men were standing around the car and Georgia noticed for the first time that some of them carried shotguns. She climbed out of the car while Raylene stayed inside.

Staring at the face of the man with the red tie, Georgia asked him: "What this all about? I got done told that Karl hurt and now I'm here and I'm lookin' at yo' ugly face wondering *what the hells goin' on*. Where Karl at?"

The man with the red tie smiled and walked over to the back passenger door and grabbed Raylene's arm, pulling her out of the Oldsmobile. Georgia didn't hesitate. Her imperative was to protect her friend, their silent agreement being that Georgia protected Raylene from any bully in exchange for her friendship. They weren't lesbians (not that there was anything wrong with that) but just good friends with a strong tacit understanding of the terms of their negotiated friendship.

"You let go of her right now," Georgia snapped. "You let go of her or you gonna be sorry. I'm telling ya .

.. "

The man with the red tie refused to listen and continued to pull Raylene out of the car, tears streaming from her eyes. He took his eyes off Georgia long enough for her to wind up her muscular right arm back like she was pulling on an arrow, her fist clenched, and then fire a shooting right hand at the man's jaw, knocking him down onto the street with a loud crack like a firecracker going off. The man lay on the ground looking up at the clouds in a daze.

The other men started laughing and one of them, carrying a shotgun, approached calmly. He pointed the shotgun at Georgia and she raised up her hands to surrender. The man with the shotgun looked down at the man with the red tie on the ground and smiled at him, purring: "Well, Lieutenant, looks like you got decked by a girl. Boys in the squad room are gonna love hearing about this."

"Like hell they will," the Lieutenant said, lifting himself up from the ground and straightening his jacket. He slapped Georgia across the face with an open palm and spit on the ground. "You're gonna have a real hard time with this whole thing if you keep acting like this." Then, the Lieutenant turned to look at Raylene and added: "Your friend is gonna have a real hard time too. You ain't helping her."

The man with the shotgun approached Georgia and showed her a badge attached to his blazer. He asked her to turn around and handcuffed her and then he did the same to Raylene, taking the two into the van. They sat down on benches inside the work van across from Mr. Jackson. The man with the red tie closed the doors to the van.

Georgia could hear Raylene crying. She wanted to tell her to stop, that it wasn't going to help, but she kept her head. She had heard enough about the local police to know that they could make you disappear with a snap of their fingers. Assuming, of course, that that was who she was dealing with. What had Karl gotten himself into?

"You watch basketball?" Mr. Jackson asked, his voice reverberating against the invisible metallic walls of the van. "You like the Pistons? I bet you like the Pistons. Well, there was this fella they used to call Bill Lambeer. Meanest player you ever saw. Knocked people down, fouled them like there's no tomorrow. You like the boxer from Grand Rapids, Floyd Mayweather? Sure you do, you like the way Floyd bobs and weaves, plays with his

opponents. Well, this fella Lambeer was meaner than Floyd. Well, I'm meaner than Bill Lambeer and Mayweather put together. I'm mean as hell . . . so don't *fuck* with me, bitches."

"Who are you?" Raylene asked. "Where are you taking us?"

"I'm taking you to Karl," he replied. "You remember Karl. Your boyfriend? Well, good ole' Karl didn't have himself a heart attack exactly. See, good ole' Karl is fine. At least for now. You know my daddy was from Russia, came here to Flint to work at the factories back in the 70s. Vitaly, that was my dad's name. Used to drink all the time. Maybe its a cultural thing, I don't know, but I'm used to drunks. My daddy was drunk every day. Hell, I like a good drink myself. Well, I guess Karl likes his drinks too, right? Hell, when I got him he was too drunk to speak. Took us a while to sober him up. He's a drinker, your friend Karl. Found him all covered with his own blood, but he's all right."

"Where Karl at?" Georgia asked, her voice calm and collected. "He hit somebody? Drunk drivin'? Stop all this talkin' 'cause I ain't interested in what no damn old fool is gotta say. Just tell me *where Karl is*. Please."

"You don't have to worry about him," Mr. Jackson said. "He's just fine and dandy. I just brought up the whole drinking thing because Karl was drunk when we got him and we come to find out he's Ukranian. Born in Prague, moved out here to Flint as a little boy. Drinkers, those Ukranians. Guess that's why he did what he did. He ever take you out to the Ukranian festival?"

"No, he ain't never took me to no festival."

"Well, when you speak to him, you should ask him why he never did that. Its a really pretty festival. They parade right down a street. All these Ukranian flags, great food."

They sat in silence inside the blackness until the van came to a stop. Mr. Jackson released a heavy breath, one he had been holding onto for some time. The doors swung open and they were face-to-face with the same men, some of them carrying shotguns. Georgia could see that they had shiny gold badges clipped onto their blazers. The two women walked out of the van, their hands cuffed behind their backs. Two of the men helped them get down without hurting themselves. Standing outside the van, Georgia could get her bearings. They were inside a parking lot. The van was parked facing an empty field.

"Where are we goin'?" Georgia asked, flashing a look at Mr. Jackson.

"Over there," he replied pointing a long yellow fingernail at a grey building she noticed for the first time. The building was less than a few hundred feet away from them, in the middle of the parking lot. It was dilapidated, with graffiti of various colors covering its walls. She saw a small grey door and a sign above the door: *Warehouse*.

"What is this?" She asked. "This ain't no police station."

"This ain't no arrest," Mr. Jackson replied.

A man cocked his shotgun and walked over to the two women. He pressed the barrel of the shotgun against Georgia's skull and told her to walk her ass to the warehouse. Mr. Jackson started walking in front of them giddily. They could hear music. Mr. Jackson fumbled with a set of keys. Finally, he indicated he didn't have the right key. He shouted up to one of the men who had stayed behind with the van that he needed the right key, and the man came strolling down from the van languidly.

The man with the key arrived and opened the door and the man with the shotgun ushered the two women inside. No boxes, no trucks. The warehouse was completely empty, aside from a figure illuminated by the light entering the warehouse from a set of gigantic glass windows on each of the four walls. There was a window on the roof as well and light streamed in from there too, bathing the figure in light. The figure was laying in a red pool, wearing a black mask, his feet tied with rope and his hands handcuffed behind him. The man wasn't wearing any shirt and Georgia could tell by the shape of his breasts and his protruding stomach that this was Karl.

"Karl," she whispered to herself, "my baby."

She loved him. She loved his pot belly and his stupid remarks. She loved his dedication to popcorn, cotton candy, and old rock n' roll songs. She liked Biggie Smalls and Dr. Dre and Karl liked the Beatles and Led Zeppelin, bands from bygone days when dreams of peace loomed. The world had since accepted that peace would never come. These were far more depressing days.

"Karl," she repeated. "My baby."

Mr. Jackson stepped in between her and her line of sight so that she couldn't see Karl anymore. Instead, she was faced with a man with a mustache and old-fashioned glasses, and a very yellow, unpleasant, icy smile.

"Karl is in *big* trouble," Mr. Jackson said. "Karl was involved in Anti-American activities, Georgia. Maybe that's something you didn't *know* about your friend."

Karl used his elbows to stand himself up. Georgia wanted to run to him but she felt the barrel of a shotgun pressed against the back of her skull. She let the tears fall from her eyes, fighting the sobs shooting up from her throat. She wiped her eyes with a sleeve. She was wearing a Bebe sweater, black with a hood attached to the back. Karl had bought it for her as a present.

"If you hurt him, I will kill you," she said. "I love that man you got there and I want to spend my life with him. I ain't got much in life, but I got him and if you hurt him, you gonna die."

"Well, that's not up to me," Mr. Jackson replied. "That's up to ole Karl. You see, Karl has been a bad boy. He's got himself involved with a group known as Detroit Earth First! You ever heard of it? No? Maybe you didn't know that about him, that he's a commie?" Georgia knew that Karl coached youth basketball and football at the YMCA. She knew that he had said some things before, about Castro and revolution, but she couldn't remember what he had said. He had never said he was a commie.

"He's not a damn *commie*," she said. "He ain't involved with *nothin'* so you just let him go. Karl ain't never hurt a fly in his whole damn life. He ain't a damn commie."

"He did say that he thought all the rich people needed to die that one time," Raylene interjected. "I remember he said that, Georgia. Maybe he's a commie. Maybe he's guilty. Is it a crime to be a commie?"

"Yes, it is," Mr. Jackson answered. "Its a big crime, punishable by *fifty years of imprisonment or death*. As the U.S. Government, we have the right to do what we choose. If we don't like someone who's a commie, we have the right to dispose of that person as we see fit, you understand? This isn't a free country for everyone, you get it?"

"I'm sorry," Karl sobbed. "I was going to tell you, but I didn't."

The man with the shotgun removed the shotgun from the back of Georgia's head and walked over to Karl. The man pumped his shotgun and pointed it at Karl's head.

"I love him," Georgia cried. "I want him to be my baby's daddy. Please, please don't hurt him. I want him to be with me forever. I love this man. Please, mister, please. Don't do an evil thing. Think of my heart. Listen to

God. Please, please don't kill my man."

He pulled the trigger as Georgia screamed "No!" so loud that her lungs seemed to jump out of her chest. She fell to the ground as a loud BANG! sounded, her hands digging into the cheeks of her face. Raylene was screaming and she kept screaming as the men burst into laughter. Georgia opened her eyes. Karl was laughing too. His hood was off now and he was on his feet. The man with the shotgun tossed the shotgun onto the ground and pulled a bowie knife from his pocket. He used it to cut the rope binding Karl's feet. Then, he removed a key from his pocket. Georgia gazed at Mr. Jackson in bewilderment. Classical music was playing, soft and pleasant. It seemed to float across the warehouse and into her ears. She found herself smiling too. Karl walked over to her, rubbing his stomach lazily.

"When we first met, you said you would never get married, remember? I asked you out and you said o.k. but that you would never get married because you'd been hurt too many times. You said you wouldn't ever get married even if someone pulled out a shotgun and said he was gonna shoot the man unless you married him. You said they could take you to an empty warehouse, pull out a shotgun, point it at the man and you still wouldn't marry him. You remember that?"

"Yes," she mumbled. "I remember."

"You said that I should stick my head up my butt if I ever wanted you as my wife, you remember *that*? Then, you said that if they ever brought you to a warehouse and told you that they were gonna shoot me, you still wouldn't marry me. You remember that?"

"Yes."

"Well, you just said you want me to be your baby's daddy, didn't you? You said you want to be with me forever, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And you know I'll never hurt you."

"I know."

Karl kissed her hand, lowered himself down on one knee and pressed a cheek against her hand. She

nodded and he stood up, slipping a ring onto her ring finger. The man with the shotgun clapped along with Mr. Jackson.

"What a lovely couple, what a lovely couple," Mr. Jackson chanted, approaching them. "But don't forget to pay my bill. We actors don't work for free."

"I love you," Georgia whispered, gazing into Karl's eyes. They walked out of the warehouse, holding hands.

6. NINO BROWN STRIKES AGAIN!

I am in a small detention cell in Copenhagen bouncing a blue ball they gave me. I have absolutely no idea why they would have given me this blue ball. Couldn't they have put a television in the cell? *Pop. Pop.* The ball bounces against the cell walls. I catch it on the rebound and keep throwing it. *Pop. Pop.* My cell mate is an African man named Rodger. He is from Nigeria. Had been living in Denmark illegally, working, trying to get himself some money. He is a member of the Yoruba tribe. The pigs from immigration had caught him because of a fight. His girlfriend's ex had assaulted him, beat him so bad he had been sent to the hospital. At the emergency room, they had checked his residency status. After his wounds had healed, he had been sent to immigration detention.

"Why are you here?" he asks me suspiciously, like he thinks I'm an undercover. He must be crazy because I'm only fifteen. I tell him the sad truth. The stupid truth. My real name is Zeus, like the Greek God, but I go by Nino. I hate my real name. I always have. I'm not Greek and I'm not a God who lives on some mountain. I had been returning home from spending a summer abroad. He had been asking everybody the same questions. How long have you been in Denmark? Are you bringing anything back to the United States that is organic in nature? Etc. When it had come to me, he had seen my name and smiled.

"That's a strange name," he had said. "Like the Greek God."

"Yeah," I had replied. "I hate it actually. My dad is a weird dude. Ain't no one else in Flint with a name like Zeus."

"You can't hate your name," he had told me. "My name is Skaargard. I love my name. You are named after

a great figure. I wish I could have a name like this."

"Yeah, well," I had muttered. "I go by Nino at school."

"You go to high school in America, yes?" He had asked me, still smiling politely.

"Yeah," I had answered. "I'm fifteen. I live in Flint."

"Why did you pick this name Nino?" he had asked. "Zeus is so much better."

"Well," I had responded, scratching my head, "there's this movie I really like. Its called *New Jack City*. Wesley Snipes is in the movie. Its about crack dealers in Harlem in New York City. The main crack dealer is a cat they call 'Nino Brown.'"

The guard had frozen. His expression had transformed into a serious one and he had motioned for another guard to join him. They had spoken in Danish for several minutes while I had waited patiently with a smile on my face. Suddenly, one of the two guards had pushed me onto the ground and the other handcuffed me! They had rushed me to a detention center located inside the airport. No charges. No words directed at me. They had let me make a phone call. I had called my moms. I had told her everything and distanced the phone from my ear after she had started screaming. I had told her *everything was going to be all right*. But I didn't really know.

After the phone call, I was placed in this cell. All because of my favorite movie. Who doesn't like Nino Brown in *New Jack City*? Wesley Snipes gave the performance of his career, man. After I'm done telling Rodger all of this, he chuckles and shakes his head. Starts to speak in Yoruba.

"I hate this country," I tell him. "Flint is bad but at least we got some rights."

I had been given a scholarship by an organization known as Youth for Truth. They pay for poor kids from one country to go to another. The family gets a stipend from the organization for food and you get the flight tickets. Sounds great, right? Promotes understanding, right? Except that you don't pick the family . . . and I had been assigned to the Danish equivalent of hicks. Danish rednecks, living on an isolated farm on an island off the mainland, hours from the nearest city. Nothing but cornfields around me. The hamlet is known as Nasbyhoved-Broby. The island is known as Fyn (Funen in English).

The mother, a nurse. The father a beer-guzzling factory worker. The entire summer, she never spent time

in the house - too busy working. The husband didn't say much. Just watched TV and guzzled beer. I couldn't speak Danish and he couldn't speak English. The two kids were jerks. The little one didn't speak English, so I can't actually say that he was a dumb-ass. But the older brother spoke English, was grossly overweight, and had lived the entirety of his life on the farm.

Needless to say, I'm coming back with pictures! *Cornfield* after *cornfield* after *cornfield*. Every picture looks the same. I spent hours running around aimlessly in them cornfields. For some reason, zeppelins would fly over the island. I swear to you. After a few weeks of boredom, I would chase them whenever they came, like a dog chasing a fucking Frisbee. The whole summer had been a disaster. Meeting up with the other exchange students at the airport, I learned that all the others had been stationed in Copenhagen. They had spent their summer in discos, partying. Several of them had been to a number of other countries. I had spent my summer in a European *cornfield* so I didn't have much to say to the other kids. Then, I got arrested.

"Europeans are civil but not friendly," Rodger is telling me. "They will respect you but they will not feed you or your family. They will not help anyone personally. Just through government. Fucking assholes." I thought of all the soup kitchens, volunteers, church groups, etc. in Flint. I guess the Europeans don't have *any of that*. I lie down in my bed and close my eyes. After a few minutes, the guards come for me. They lead me down a hallway to a small room with a table, a telephone, and two chairs. Sitting on one chair is a fat man with a few strands of hair combed over his bald chrome dome.

"Hello," he says, pointing to the other chair. "Please have a seat."

"If this is some kind of interrogation chamber," I begin, clenching my fists, "I hope you know that I will make sure your ass is prosecuted to the fullest extent of the motherfuckin' law, you Euro-bitch. You pieces of shit can't hold me here like this."

The man pauses. His mouth is open and he doesn't blink for a while.

"We are releasing you," he says. "This was all a big misunderstanding. The guard misunderstood what you said. He thought you were saying that you were a crack dealer."

"I've never even seen crack," I say, slapping my own forehead in frustration. "I'm fifteen. I'm a good

student. I ain't never been in no trouble."

"Well," the man continues. "The Government of Denmark has kindly purchased you another ticket. You leave tomorrow. We've also obtained a suite for you at the finest hotel in Copenhagen, Zeus. Please accept our deepest apologies." He points to the black telephone on the table and informs me that I should pick up the receiver.

"Hello?"

I hear the voice loud and clear on the other side. "Hi, this is Senator John Kerry. From Massachusetts. Your father contacted your congressman and your congressman contacted me because I'm the head of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Big stink over here in America."

"About me?"

"Yes, about you. Seems that this has been quite a mess. Someone arrested without due process. Very irregular. I contacted the Ambassador to Denmark and he took care of the matter personally."

"Thank you so much, sir."

I get escorted out of the detention center and driven to the Hilton in a limousine. The driver informs me that my bags are in the back. He drives me up to the entrance, parks the car, and carries my bags into the lobby. I am immediately handed a key and taken to the penthouse suite. My bags are carried up by two members of the hotel staff. I'm smiling like I've just won the lottery. I feel just like Nino Brown.

The room is huge. There is a hot tub. I slam the door shut behind me and take off my clothes. I jump into the hot water and turn on the TV. I flip the channels looking for something in English until I find a pornographic channel. Hard porn on live television!

"Sweet!" I shout and begin masturbating inside the tub. After I was done, I just let myself float, staring up. The roof of the penthouse is made of glass. I can see a clear blue sky. I'm perfectly calm now. I really am just like Nino Brown in *New Jack City*. I'm sweet as all hell.

7. MIGUEL AND DA BOTTLE

I met Miguel and Amber through Steph, perhaps the most annoying woman I've ever met in my life. Never a friendly smile. Never a good conversation. Everything was about her life, her family, her dreams. As for me, she didn't really much care about anything I had to say. I could have died during one of our conversations and she would have just kept on talking by damn herself. She did introduce me to Miguel and Amber, though.

"These people are real clingy," she had warned me. I had absolutely no idea how right she really was. I met them that first time at a small Mexican restaurant in an isolated section of Flint, where we ended up having beers, shots and tacos. Miguel and I hit it off right away, making jokes about famous people we hated and discussing hip hop. At some point during the night, the two of us met a girl from the Upper Peninsula who had moved to Flint to be a part of the "rave scene." Miguel and I were polite and tried to get her to stick around, to listen to some of her dreams of warehouse parties and ecstasy.

I had come out of the rave scene. Actually, I think I had been a part of every scene. From factory parties, to punk and metal shows, to bars and clubs. Strangely enough, with all the people I had met, I had only been in love once. Now, that relationship had ended - splintered to pieces. She hadn't been a raver. Missy had been a good-hearted hippie chick with a great sense of humor. The two of us seemed to have been made for each other - but my anger at the world had killed us. I couldn't move past it.

Miguel made me realize how great hip hop music really was, how it was about celebrating life. I had grown up in a small town in Michigan where my friends and I listened to rock and metal. I had spent numerous nights sitting in the middle of the woods, drinking and smoking weed, listening to the latest metal tracks wearing a flannel shirt. Then, I had moved to Flint and into electronic music and punk. Now, I was listening to a lover of hip hop discourse on the virtues of the genre. Swagger. Fun. Self-assuredness. These were tenets of the medium. In less than a week, Miguel had me in baggy jeans sporting a fade haircut. I bought a fitted cap and he introduced me to some of the locals. I was getting sold on the hip hop dream.

I don't think I ever had as much fun. The Flint police force was a joke. The three of us would go out -

Miguel, Amber and I - and drive back drunk every day, smoking weed inside the car, bumpin' beats. We seemed to be headed towards a lasting friendship when I got a call from Miguel on a quiet Thursday evening.

"Nino, man," Miguel muttered, his voice filled with tears. "I got kicked out of my mom's house. I need help, bro, because I ain't got nowhere to go. Can I stay with you for a week, until things cool down?"

"Sure," I answered. "One week. No problem. Come through."

He came by a couple hours after that and I told him he could crash on the couch. I had no idea that Miguel would be spending five months living in my apartment. Of course, the company was nice. He was an alcoholic who couldn't go a day without drinking some rum. As it turns out, his moms had kicked him out of the house because he couldn't keep himself away from the bottle. Regardless of how little money he had, he always found a way to scrape together a couple of bucks from different sources to get himself some rum and some weed. Although I wasn't an alcoholic, sometimes it was nice to get myself some booze and weed, relax and put my feet up.

Also, as ugly and unlucky with women as he was, Miguel had several female friends. Actually, they were his girlfriend's friends but they always ended up coming by and every couple of nights we had a party. Most of these parties didn't lead anywhere but me passing out on the deck and Miguel sleeping on the couch with Amber. I knew that Miguel was using me, that I should be charging the man rent. That he was a no-good bum who was living for free in my apartment while I killed myself to pay the bills - but the guy was just *way too much fun*.

I couldn't deny it. He could make parties happen in mere minutes. That was how Miguel could live without working. As opposed to holding down a job, he made friends who supported him, in exchange for him connecting you with other people. One night, however, everything changed. Miguel had been living in the apartment for five months, setting up parties for us almost every night, keeping the place stocked with booze and weed. Him and Amber were hilarious and had made those five months some of the funniest I have ever lived through. Miguel would spit non-sense rhymes and Amber and I would start laughing. What can I say? The three of us were *homies*. There's no other word for it. No word that can express this new feeling of being part of something bigger than myself.

It was through Miguel that I had met Melissa, my new girlfriend. I forgot my screwed up fall-out with Missy for a while and just lived life. I was stupid and happy, spitting hip hop slang and sporting gold jewelry. I looked like a pimp. In retrospect, letting Miguel live for free on my couch was probably one of the best moves I ever made. After Melissa and I broke up for some mysterious reason I'll never understand, Miguel immediately sprang to action. Mr. Connections. We were at Club Miami across the street the next day and Miguel introduced me to Jenny, selling me to her like I was the next hip hop super-star. I was *solid*. I was *dope*. I was going to drop a record in the next few weeks. Yeah right - I couldn't have put together a song for the life of me.

Miguel was the man. Except for his temper with Amber. On the one night when everything changed - when we went from friends to strangers - I was sleeping. It was winter now. A Flint winter, however, is nothing like winter anywhere else. Flint winters send your thoughts into the clouds as you're walking alone on snow-covered sidewalks. Flint winters isolate you from yourself. I was asleep. Dreaming winter dreams of ice fishing. Dreaming of finding a woman who loved me. I was metaphysically in Heaven when I heard it.

Screaming. Like someone was getting killed. Then repeated thuds. I woke up with a start, shook the cobwebs loose in my head and jumped out of bed. I slipped my jeans on and opened the door, grabbed a baseball bat I kept by the closet in case of emergencies. Amber was kneeling in the kitchen, her face smashed to pieces. Her lips were bloodied and her eyes were puffy.

"He - he tried to kill me," Amber whimpered, unable to grasp what had happened. "Nino, Nino please help me. Please help me." I bent down and held her close to me, putting her head against my chest. She was a hefty girl and I had never thought about her in a sexual way, but I have to say that - at that moment - she appeared to me to be more beautiful than she had ever been before. She needed my help and she trusted me. I held her and wiped the blood away from her mouth with a wet rag. Miguel stood in the corner by himself, afraid to come closer. He walked to the door and left the apartment.

"Do you want me to call the police?" I asked her, gazing into her eyes. I had wiped the blood off her face and she was calmer now. Those big blue eyes. I saw trust in them.

"No," she whispered quietly. "I still love him."

A hefty girl who had been made to feel unattractive her whole life, maybe ridiculed by the other girls at school. Miguel made her feel special, made her feel pretty. She felt special because a connected guy like that wanted to be with *her*. But his drinking was sliding more and more out of control. He would lash out at her if she tried to keep him away from the bottle.

"Are you sure?" I pressed.

"Yes," she replied solemnly. "I tried to get him away from the booze and he told me to shut up. It's the damn rum that got to him. I took the bottle away and he went crazy, started trying to kill me."

I put her in my bed and slept on the floor, staring up at the ceiling, wondering how to react. Miguel was my friend, he had hooked me up with a whole new crowd, girls, and taught me how to give less of a shit. Those five months had helped me put aside the anger. After a lifetime of anger, I was learning to live joyfully. Miguel came back the next day. He had slept out on the streets, under a bench somewhere. I didn't know what to say, so I said the stupidest thing I could have said: "Miguel, if this ever happens again, I will toss you out of here." He just lowered his head in shame. The next day, he moved out.

8. THE MEAN OLD BASTARD WITHOUT LIMBS

Rodney climbs into his Buick Lesabre and turns the engine on, switching the station just in time. "Soul Man" by Sam & Dave is on and he drives off humming that song, thinking about Sally. His Sally is a nurse and has a voice that sounds like honey dripping off a honeycomb.

"Rodney," she would often say, "if there is any man in the world who makes me smile as much as you do, I'll be damned." Pulling up to the hospital, he thinks about something clever to say, something that will show he loves her, let her know she's the one for him. "Baby you are the *sweetest peach cobbler I've ever tasted*" or "when I think of you, I have to stop thinking because my heart starts to hurt too damn bad."

He enters the hospital, passing doctors and nurses, taking the elevator up to the third floor. The elevator door opens and Rodney walks into a crowded hallway past some nurses working on a bleeding man. Rodney

crosses himself as he passes the man and proceeds to the end of the hall. The nurse's lounge. He had called Sally from a payphone and told her to meet him there at precisely 2:00 p.m. It is 1:58 p.m. She's already in the lounge waiting for him, her long legs crossed.

"Baby, you are the sweetest peach cobbler I've ever tasted!" Rodney announces, spreading his arms. She smiles and jumps out of her seat to kiss him, but there is something different about the way she is today. Her hair is the same red mess, shining under the hospital lights. Her eyes are the same deep green, but her red mouth showcases a terrible sort of emotion.

"What's the matter?" he asks her, gazing into her eyes, diving into her soul.

"It's a man," she confesses. "An old man who got here today. I don't think I've ever seen anyone like him. I don't think I've ever met a man so angry. The poor old man."

"Well, let me go talk to him, tell him that if he messes with my girl, he's going to have himself trouble." She stands on the tips of her toes to kiss him and he holds her tight.

"Maybe you could have a talk with him. Nothing too aggressive. I don't want any trouble. Just tell him to take it easy with the insults."

Sally leads him to a room, checks the chart hanging on the door and proceeds into the chamber. There is only one bed in the room and an old man without any legs or arms stares at them with a sour expression. His face is slightly disfigured.

"Hello, *fuckface*," the old man hisses, laughing. "You're late, *bitch*. I need someone to change my diapers. I shat all over myself. I'm covered in my own feces."

Sally sighs and looks to Rodney for help.

"Relax there, old timer," Rodney states, pulling air into his chest, standing tall. "No need for verbal abuse. I understand that you're in a tough situation - "

"You understand?" The old man interrupts. "You understand jack shit. I got no damn arms or legs, you arrogant son of a bitch. You get it? I ain't ever gonna walk again for the rest of my damn life. Never. You got legs and arms, so what the hell do you understand?"

Rodney freezes. The poor old man is right. He has no idea what it is like to live without arms and legs. He has both. Rodney tries to imagine what it must be like to be the old man, but the pain is unbearable.

"I'm sorry," Rodney mutters. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to imply that I could possibly - "

"Well, you did more than imply it!" The old man shouts, interrupting again. "You said it outright, you heartless son of a bitch! You looked at a man - a damn veteran of two foreign fucking wars - who lost his arms and legs in a painful freak car accident because some drunk driver had to drink his booze and get behind the wheel, and you told me to relax. *To relax!*"

"I didn't mean - "

"You shut your damn piehole!" The old man snaps. "I'm seventy-three years of age and I've been shot at in Vietnam and Korea before that. I bled for this damn country, you understand you snot-nosed piece of *dog shit*?"

"Yes, sir," Rodney whispers. "All I meant to do was ask you to take it easy on Sally. She's my girl, right Sal? Tell him you're my girl."

"That's right," Sally sings, smiling. "I'm his girl, but you'll have to excuse me for a second. I'll leave you two boys to have a nice personal chat while I go get some fresh diapers."

"Get the good kind!" The old man shouts as Sally leaves the room. "That other kind gives me a rash. You ever have a rash on your ass because some lazy bitch forgot to come and change your diapers after you shit yourself and you got no arms so you have to lay there with the shit all squeezing against your butt cheeks?"

After a brief pause, Rodney states that he has never suffered the displeasure of that experience. The old man scowls at him and starts to tell him about his service in Korea and Vietnam, but stops and sighs. He takes a couple grapes from a tray and places some in his mouth. He chews the grapes as he talks to Rodney.

"You ever been to war before boy?" The old man asks Rodney, still chewing on the grapes. "A real war. Not this namby pamby bullshit they have today with all the button-pushing and technology?"

"No sir."

"Yeah, I knew the answer to that question before I even asked it. Swear to God I killed more Vietcong than anyone else in Uncle Sam's Army. Imagine that! I go to war all that time and nothing happens to me. Not a scratch.

And then I come home and some damn drunk driver swerves out of his lane and hits me! Isn't that a son of a bitch?"

"Yes, sir, it is," Rodney murmurs. "It's absolutely horrible."

"No shit!" The old man snaps, chewing on his grapes. "You ain't too bright is you? I should call up the government to see if they can get me plastic arms and legs so I can stumble my way over to you and slap you upside the damn head, you snot-nosed little piece of - "

The old man pauses and starts to cough, his face turning blue. He starts to hit his own chest and flail about. Then, he grabs his throat and squeezes it. Rodney finally realizes that the old man is choking and snaps into action, pulling the old man out of the bed. He pumps the old man's stomach twelve times before a gob of wet grapes flies out of the old man's throat and sticks to a white wall. He carries the old man back to the bed. The old man looks at him with his big blue eyes.

"Thank you," the old man whispers. "You saved my life."

"Listen, sir," he says in a low, even tone. "I understand that you've been through a lot and this situation must be disheartening. I can never hope to know your pain. But I'm asking you to please take it easy on my girlfriend if that is possible. She's my girl, Sally is, and I would just really appreciate it if you could take it easy on her, sir. Please."

"Pain?" The old man chuckles. "You think I'm in pain?"

"I know you must be very upset after what has happened to you but I'm asking - "

The old man bursts into a raucous laughter, the back of his head digging into the pillow, his face pointed at the ceiling of the hospital room, his chest heaving up and down. The laughter is loud and strong, genuine.

"Sir, I understand - "

"You think I'm in pain?" The old man laughs. "You think I'm suffering?"

"Yes, sir, but - "

"I'm not in any pain!" The old man shouts, smiling. "Listen, son, you seem like a real nice kid and you saved my life, so I'm going to be honest with you. Getting hit by that drunk driver was the greatest thing that ever

happened to me in my whole life!"

"Excuse me?" Rodney asks, confused. "I don't get it."

"You're excused," the old man replies jocundly. "I don't feel any pain at all. In fact, I don't feel much of anything, so that's not a problem. But I will tell you this, son. I took a whole lot of shit in my life. Spent my whole life taking it. Just taking it and taking it and taking it. Just taking a lot of shit. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I took shit when I used to work as a car mechanic, taking shit from the boss and the customers. I took shit when I was in the army from them commanders and everything. I took shit when I came back. Finally, people stopped giving me shit at all. But it wasn't because I had risen up in the world. It was because nobody was around to give a shit about me anymore because when you make it to your seventies no one gives a shit anymore about you. Not family. Not friends. Not a damn soul. They just see you as an old bastard. So, I get hit bad by this car, right?"

"Right."

"And suddenly I'm here in this hospital, right?"

"Right."

"And suddenly I can give everyone in the world shit and they have to take it. Why? Because I'm the most pitiful sight anyone has ever seen. What's more pitiful than a man in his seventies without arms or legs?"

"You're not pitiful, sir."

"Oh yes I am," the old man giggles. "And I love every second of it because not only do I get myself some attention but all these people have to take shit from me. Suddenly I'm the one giving all the shit and everybody else is taking it. All because of that wonderful car accident, and losing some arms and legs that were useless on an old man like me. You get it?"

"You're happy about the accident?"

"Yes!" The old man screams. "Happy as I could ever be! It was the best thing ever! Now, everybody is afraid to tell me to go fuck myself because I got no arms and legs. And what sort of evil person fails to understand

that you are angry because you have no arms and legs? So, they don't even understand that I was a lonely old man, ignored by everybody before this tragedy, and now I have an excuse to give everybody shit all the time!"

The old man laughs long and hard, the most joyous laughter Rodney had ever heard in his life! As soon as Sally walks in, the old man tells her to fuck off, breaking out into a long rant about how she brought him the wrong diapers.

9. HIPSTER BITCHES MUST DIE

T. and Rex are already at the bar when I get to the Endzone. God knows how many beers they've already had but they look plastered as all shit. Behind the bar, the pretty girl is pouring a shot out for an immigrant worker. He looks like every other immigrant worker in this neighborhood, like someone sucked the life out of him. The jukebox is playing some kind of techno tune and some gangster types with gold chains are playing pool in the backroom.

The Endzone is located next to a go-go bar called the Elite Bar. Some of the dancers are in the place, guzzling away more booze after an afternoon of drinking at work. A girl sitting at the end of the bar looks so dazed off some jack that she reminds me of a Bassett hound, her cheeks droopy and her eyes vacant. She has piercings all over her face.

"You're late," Rex says, taking a drag off his cigarette.

"Whatever," I say.

I'd had trouble with my strange Chinese landlord. The place he rents out to me costs me only \$750 a month but there is a hole in one of the walls. The cats living upstairs, some Ecuadorian guys, were supposed to fix it but they never came. I had knocked on their door a couple times and some third guy, shirtless and tired, told me they hadn't got home from work yet. So, I had called up the landlord and sat around in my apartment waiting for him to arrive with someone to fix the hole. After two hours, he had arrived with a repairman and they had created a contraption to cover the hole - some thick insulation to fill the hole and wood boards to cover it up, along with

some cement to hold the boards in place.

"Did I tell you guys what happened last night?" I ask my friends.

"No," T. replies.

"So, I'm coming home and this kid is kneeling, messing around with a car and the car alarm goes off. This huge cat comes running out of the house and grabs the kid by the neck. The kid is scared, so he curls up into a ball and begs the big guy not to beat him up. Turns out the kid was a car thief and my neighbor had caught him. Cops came and arrested the kid."

"You know your neighbor's name?" Rex asks.

"Not a damn clue. He lives in the building I was in last year."

Last year. Shit, motherfucker. I can't even talk about last year. I was living with a Turkish couple - Akin and a woman whose name I can't remember. Well, Akin and his girl were a strange couple. Had some sort of crazy sex thing going on where he was allowed to sleep with other women while she had to stay true to him. The three of us lived just up the street from a place called the Sexy Social Club, a sort of swingers bar frequented by the former Mayor. Akin was a card-carrying member of the club and often returned home with prostitutes.

My girlfriend at the time was a girl named Andrea from Saginaw, recently relocated to Flint. She worked as a nurse and had a kid. A serious mom type of woman with a good soul and an amazing heart. Problem is that I worked like a dog and we almost never saw each other. So, I'm finally able to get a weekend and spend it with Andrea. Two days in a row without work. We spend the time in my room, walking around the neighborhood and taking showers together. Turns out, these romantic showers were a problem for the perverted Turkish couple.

After my magical weekend with Andrea, they had asked me to leave. I had started looking for an apartment and found one a week later. The night before I moved out, Akin came home with a prostitute and had sex with her on the couch while his girlfriend remained in their bedroom. She never came out. Never complained.

I moved a couple doors down and set up my place. The Chinese landlord seemed like a nice enough guy but he would show up at the oddest times of the day wearing muscle shirts, his tall muscular blond boyfriend following him around wearing sunglasses. I would see him standing outside the building in the parking lot - "just

doing maintenance," he would say, grinning sheepishly. I think they had something odd going on with the neighbor downstairs, this chubby short-haired pig-looking cat who played show tunes at maximum volume early in the morning.

Anyways, the neighbor who busted the kid trying to steal his car was living where I used to live with Akin and his girlfriend . . . *shit, where was I in this damn story?* I got to stop smoking weed like I do . . . *I get all mixed up . . . sorry . . .*

So, anyways, I'm sitting at the Endzone with T. and Rex when a girl walks in, pale with light brown hair. She passes me and sits by herself at the end of the bar. She's wearing a scarf and a thin coat. Tiny nods at her and Rex rolls his eyes.

"She's a hipster bitch," Rex says. "Probably down here to save some of the animals. These fucking hipsters think they can save the world. I'm Puerto Rican, right? So, this hipster bitch I'm seeing, her and I start to go out and she says to me 'you should act more Puerto Rican.' Because I like to listen to country music."

"You like country?"

"Yes, sir," Rex replies. "Love the stuff. Jackson Browne. Johnny Cash. I don't know why, I just happen to like country, you dig? Don't give me shit about it."

T. and I nod.

"Well," Rex continues, "this racist piece of trash says to me that I can't listen to country because I'm Puerto Rican. Isn't that fucking racist? I tell her that I'm a human being and that I can do whatever the fuck I want. If I want to listen to country, I'm going to listen to country. But she keeps on insisting that I should be listening to salsa because I'm Puerto Rican, she keeps on insisting that I should act more Puerto Rican, immerse myself in the culture as if I wasn't familiar with it, so - "

"Was she a Jew?" T. asks. "Them Jews are rich and are obsessed with everybody acting like a particular culture or group. They're all rich, the Jews. They don't know the streets, so they have a simplified view of everybody out here. They think we all act like we're from some other planet or some shit. How could they know any different? The only things they know about us comes from fuckin' TV."

"She wasn't a Jew, dummy," Rex answers curtly. "Just a hipster bitch from the suburbs. So, this hipster bitch, she wants to save the world, right? Like every upper-middle-class douche bag who's never done a day of manual labor in their lives."

"So what happened?" I ask.

"So, the hipster bitch insists that I can't listen to country. That I have to immerse myself in Puerto Rican culture. That I have to be more Puerto Rican. The racist fucking bitch. I tell her that I am Puerto Rican but that I can do any damn thing I want because I'm a fucking human being, I'm not her fucking pet project."

"So what happened?"

"So, we're driving along, on our way to a cabin out by Sanford Lake near Midland over in the Tri-Cities and I'm trying to listen to the country station and this brainwashed hipster racist dumb-ass keeps switching the station. So, I pull over and tell her to *get the fuck out*."

"You told her to get the fuck out way out there in Sanford?"

"Yep. She lives here in Flint. I left her out there on the side of the highway. Let her ass save the world by walking a couple days to get home."

The three of us laugh. I imagine a little hipster girl with all the innocence that they have inside their rich minds walking around wondering why this man would have kicked her out of the car. I wonder whether the hipster girl turned from a "I wanna save the world" type to an "I hate them all" type after that. I, however, have a different life philosophy from Rex. I'm a bastard. I believe there are five types of women: (1) the Barbie, who is annoying and artificial, worried about looks all the time, (2) the hipster, as discussed above they want to save all the world like we were flies in an upper-class museum for them to preserve, (3) the worn-down woman, who has worked her whole life and now just goes from day to day, (4) the party girl, who just wants to get wasted, have a good time, get some life experience, and (5) the Special Ones.

The Special One is a real sort of woman. She's pretty but she doesn't worry about her looks all the time. She's not a hipster, isn't out to save the world like all the world's cultures were flies to be categorized and kept safe in a glass case. She's not worn down and tired - she's energetic and eager to live life. She doesn't want to party for

the sake of collecting life experiences. She wants to party because she wants to have fun. She's a real sort of person.

Now, Andrea has broken up with me because we can barely see each other because of my busy schedule. The girl at the end of the bar is definitely no Andrea. She's not a real person. She lives in a fantasy world of "good guys" and "bad guys." She's from an upper-class sort of background, I'm sure of it. Doesn't know a damn thing about the real world. No, this is the kind of chick you have fun with. Talk shit to. So, I approach her, sitting next to her.

"So, what are you doing here?" I inquire.

She springs to life and starts to speak a mile a minute: "I'm here to work at an AIDS clinic with women. I'm from Kansas City originally, just here in town to do some work to help out."

She goes on and on about all the different peoples who came here from all over the world. I'm doing my best to seem interested but I'm watching horses run across a field in my mind. I'm somewhere in the West. I'm Jesse James, the outlaw, *robbing trains*. Then, I'm Wyatt Earp outside of the O.K. Corral, you dig?

I start to go to work and feed her lines: "I'm half black. My dad is from Nigeria. My mother is a white Iranian. I've suffered with oppression my whole life. Yes, its true. I am from a non-white third world culture. I've always been ashamed of my cultures. I can't listen to Nigerian music because I'm ashamed to be Nigerian. I can't listen to Iranian music because I'm ashamed to be Iranian. I hate myself. I hate my cultures. I hate my heritages."

As I expected (I'm a motherfuckin' playah!), this line sends the hipster bitch into the stars. Her life philosophy compels her to act *in furtherance of her views*. After all, her philosophy commands her to *save someone like me*. She has to save me from this mental prison I live in. Of course, she doesn't realize that I'm just some poor white guy who wants to get laid.

"Really?" she says. "My goodness. That's terrible. You have to be proud of your cultures. It is imperative. You should act more Nigerian. Get yourself some Nigerian clothes. Listen to some Nigerian music."

"I will," my lyin' ass says. "I will. But I need your help to do it."

So, the next day, me and this bitch are downtown, shopping around in a Nigerian shop. She's looking for

some Nigerian clothes for me to wear. I give her a sob story the entire time, telling her how my people were *oppressed* because we were members of the Yoruba tribe and the Yoruba are being attacked by Muslims from the North.

She has her hands on my arm, pointing her doe eyes at my face. She tells me that she believes in justice and truth. *And I end up fucking her that night.* I do to her things I would never do to most women. I fuck her while I cover her mouth because I don't want to hear any of her bullshit. I turn her out. I'm proud to say it. The next day, walking out the door, I turn to her. She's smiling at me and I say: "Actually bitch, I'm sorry to tell you this now, but I'm just a guy from Flint." I walk out with a big smile, my dick still hurting from all the fucking I had done the previous night.

10. FLINT AFRICAN

The wind blew over the African plains with an incisive viciousness, slashing through a nest of serpents, a grassy castle decorated only sporadically with splotches of trees like gouging spires. Here in this land, on this plain, was a simple house made of red brick and covered with a makeshift roof composed of branches and the trunks of small trees, tied together with vines and rope. This roof would withstand no storms but it might protect the inhabitants - if only *temporarily* - from the rays of a coldhearted sun staring down at them.

Outside of the house stood a man known by the others as The Adder, a name they had chosen after searching Dr. Agongko's books for the perfect handle for their boss, a name fierce yet silent enough to describe the dark disposition of this seemingly calm man who could kiss his children at one moment and remove a machete from his thick leather belt the next to strike down an elderly woman. The Adder smoked calmly, blowing tufts of grey smoke at the wind, as if the air blasting past him, threatening to destroy the roof of their home, was nothing compared to his lack of humanity. If the others, known to each other as Zidane, Roberto Carlos, and Rooney (they had chosen the names of famous footballers as their handles), were nervous energy incarnate, vibrant and explosive, furious and unpredictable, gunpowder exploding without purpose and at the slightest whim, The Adder

was the shaper of the fire, sculpting their natural destructive tendencies into apparatuses for lucre.

All of them had been raised in the Nigerian shantytowns just outside of Lagos and each carried scars from an upbringing that had transformed them from men into hideous wolves. Zidane's face carried an "X" across it. He had kidnapped a child three years ago, in order to have the boy as his assistant for holdups they would practice around the city, keeping the child subservient by first exposing him to the white powder and then using that addiction to maintain control, to force the boy to bend to his will. The boy's father had been able to find the boy two years after he had been taken, had pinned Zidane to the ground, cut into his face, and, just as he was about to stab into the kidnapper's heart, had fallen dead as Zidane had shot into the man's skull with a pistol he liked to keep in his boot.

Roberto Carlos was missing his right eye, an eye socket presenting itself unabashedly above a wide Cheshire Cat smile decorated with white teeth perfectly punctuated by black cavities like piano keys. His eye had been taken out by a Muslim who had come to his shack to sell him Mohammedan notions of paradise. When Roberto Carlos had reacted by spitting on the man and cursing the Koran, the man had knocked him down with his massive frame and reached into his cranium to remove the treasured globe.

Rooney had moved into Lagos from the hot jungle at age six and his entire body carried scars he could not explain. He had been exposed to intoxicants and had developed a habit by the age of eight, growing used to numbing his memories - at first, alcohol; then, the sweet smell of glue; then, cocaine; and, finally, crack cocaine. For a few t-shirts stolen from stands or sandals skillfully excised from the feet of women sleeping on cots in the streets, he could purchase himself enough to stay the pangs of famine and remove himself into a world where things moved faster, pain was a dream, and rage consumed everything around it brilliantly.

As for The Adder, he had no scars and no one knew much about him, save that he had enjoyed some modicum of an education, could read, spoke a better version of the Yoruba language. It was, to the others, as if The Adder had been contaminated by the schools of the country - schools they distrusted and which seemed to teach no one anything of great value. Children could not use mathematics to keep from starving, nor could they cure their infections with literature. Although these men (Zidane, Carlos, and Rooney) were all *children*

themselves, hovering around seventeen or eighteen, the travesty of their childhoods had made them erratic murdering jackals, and they regarded The Adder (who was twenty) as a calm, wise elder.

"What do we do with the white woman?" Rooney asked The Adder in Yoruba, his skinny frame pressed against the door of the house. "The authorities will know we have her by now. The husband will have told them, handed them the ransom note."

The Adder did not bother to answer until the same question was repeated a second time, and then he turned around to face Rooney with the disdainful look of a professor addressing an erroneous halfwit pupil who simply could not grasp his lessons. He lightly stamped Rooney on the forehead with an open palm.

"This has already been explained to you," The Adder stated in his calm, even tone. "Perhaps you would remember such things if you did not drug yourself every five minutes."

Rooney lowered his head in shame and vowed to trust The Adder, cursing his own curiosity. After all, Dr. Agongko had chosen this man as their leader, had introduced him as a "calm but dangerous man" and had asked them to browse through the books in his library to pick a name befitting such a man. And Rooney, Zidane, and Roberto Carlos had browsed through the entire contents of a book on animals until they had arrived at that name - The Adder. Dr. Agongko had read the description for them and they had all nodded. *A cold-blooded animal whose very name seemed to stink of venom.*

Retreating to a corner of the hut, somewhere behind the redheaded woman, Rooney found his glass pipe and plastic bag filled with rocks, placed one rock into the pipe and then used a lighter to light the pipe, drawing in the black fumes. Then, he sat sideways, bringing his knees into his chest, curling into a ball, trying hard to remember the plan Dr. Agongko had lain before them in his office, in his apartment. Rooney remembered the apartment - it was like nothing he had ever seen. It had three bedrooms for just one man, his woman, and one child, as well as televisions, desks, couches, carpets, a room filled with books (a "library" Dr. Agongko had called it) and closets filled with clothes.

The white woman was muttering to herself, sick with fever. *What was the plan?* Rooney tried to remember, recalling meeting The Adder and the other men, being told that they had to pick names for themselves

(and that they had to pick the name of their favorite footballer but that the man now known as The Adder was their leader, and that they had to pick a special name to designate their commander). He recalled the men choosing their names, gazing at each other, trying to see the soul of each stranger. They had known nothing about each other.

What was the plan? Something about taking the woman from her husband. But now the husband did not want to pay. Something had gone wrong. Yes, something went wrong with the plan. But what was the plan? What was it now? What had it been before? As if reading his mind, The Adder stepped forward and summoned them before him, asking them to sit in front of him as he paced back and forth, throwing occasional piercing, hateful glances at the woman.

"Friends," The Adder pronounced, "Dr. Agongko brought us together for the purpose of taking this woman from her husband, a rich man. I do not know Dr. Agongko's real name, as I do not know any of your real names, and you do not know mine. We came together to take her, for dollars. Dollars. Beautiful dollars. But, the rich man has decided that he will not take care of his woman. He is a rich man from a rich place, but - "

"Where is he from, this man?" Roberto Carlos interrupted.

"Norway," The Adder replied.

"I have never heard of this country," Roberto Carlos said, surveying the men around him and finding them all in agreement. None of them had ever heard of such a place. "Is it near Nigeria?"

"No, it is not," The Adder explained, running a rugged hand over a calloused dome, looking at that moment like a sixty-year-old man. "It is in Europe, far from here. He is a rich man, a rich man, and his whole life was given to him, from the time of his birth. He has not starved. He has not killed. He has not had to take what is not his."

"Not much of a man," Zidane snarled, scratching a cut on his leg, looking up to see The Adder's angry, clouded face, knowing enough to keep quiet. The Adder had removed his machete from his belt and was scraping it against the ground. Everyone knew then to keep quiet.

"When we took this woman," The Adder continued, now sure that he would not be interrupted, "you will remember that I used this blade to cut the bodyguard's throat in front of the husband. I let that big man *bleed* on the

Norwegian's suit. I let the big black man slump over the Norwegian, as you sat there with guns drawn in the restaurant with me. We surrounded them with guns drawn as the big man blew his nose, placing his gun down on the table, giving us a window of opportunity. We took that moment and I ran to the table and snatched the big black man's gun and held it against his head, and you all ran over with guns drawn, and I took this blade and I cut the big black man's throat open for the white man from Norway to see. Do you remember?"

The men nodded, surveying each other as they did so. They all recalled that heroic scene at the restaurant. It had been as Dr. Agongko (or whatever his real name was) had told them it should be. They should sit outside the restaurant like beggars, waiting for the security guard (who always walked around with pistol drawn) to let his guard down and then take the white woman. Kill the security guard in front of the husband, let him know they meant business.

"All went according to plan," The Adder began again, and then repeated himself:

"All...went...according...to...plan. So why are we here? Why have we not left this place? Why has the man from Norway, who has never had to kill, not presented us with the money? Why has the ransom money not arrived?"

All faces stared in utter ignorance.

"Because he's a dog!" The Adder shouted. "He would allow his own woman to sit here, he would refuse to give us the money we asked for. He lets his own wife rot here with real men. So, we must do what we can. We must shock him, force his decency into paying. Even a devil must yield."

After pronouncing these last few words, The Adder stripped down, showcasing his taught athletic form, different from the emaciated impoverished physiques of the other men, all of whom stared at him in awe as if he was a spirit descended from the realm of the Gods. One of the men began to mouth words in the Yoruba religion, calling to their Gods, asking them to come into the room, to guide their powerful leader in his quest to complete their task.

Approaching the white woman, The Adder's face looked solemn, worn, like an old shoe that had traversed a thousand miles, the soles coming unglued from the body, the laces gnarled and the heel cracked. The Adder had killed many men before, some women, and even a few children, including a six-month-old infant the mother had

paid him to dispose of rather than see the child suffer. He had never raped a woman.

Dr. Agongko, a wiry Nigerian with thin glasses and a wrinkled suit, with a smile a bit like that of a snarling prairie dog, had anticipated that the white man might not pay. Before the others had arrived, before they had chosen their names, as he had sat alone with Dr. Agongko in his apartment in Lagos, the Doctor had confided these words to him: *"My old friend, I have never studied medicine. Yet, I have practiced as a physician here in Lagos for many years. I am a trusted doctor, going by this name you know me by, Dr. Agongko. No one has ever questioned my credentials, even as too many of my patients died at my operating table. Yet, I have over the years, as a respectable member of this city, met this Norwegian many times. He is a rich man but his wife is many decades younger than him, so he may not pay as she is only a woman to him and nothing else. If such is the case, I have a remedy ..."*

The remedy was rape.

Dr. Agongko had given him a video camera, taught him how to use it, asked him to record it and then to call him. The tape would find its way to the rich Norwegian and then the white man would pay - as heartless as this man was, he would not allow his woman to suffer such humiliation. He would come and he would pay in order to stop them. No man could be expected to do anything less, even a heartless man must perform his most basic masculine duties.

"What are you doing?" the white woman asked in Yoruba.

"You speak Yoruba!" The Adder exclaimed as the others rushed out of the house and stood outside, praying to their Gods, accepting this as an omen that the woman was possessed. Only The Adder seemed to reason that the woman had taught herself the language after residing in the country for a significant period of time. "Most of the whites do not learn our language. They speak English only, with those of us sophisticated enough to speak their language. Why have you not spoken before? Now, you speak - but why? Why now and not before?"

She gazed at The Adder, viewing his naked body, his exposed member, flaccid and shriveled.

"I hoped my husband would pay," she answered, licking her dry lips. The Adder had never seen a white woman up close before. Her eyes were a pale green and her hair a sort of light blood red. She was thin and young,

maybe nineteen, with a sharp nose and fair skin - only one year younger than him but he did not feel his own age. He felt at least fifty. The woman continued: "But I am nothing to him but a whore, so I knew he would not. I am from a city in the United States called Flint, poor like Nigeria, where most in the city are not whites like me - "

"Michigan?" The Adder asked. He could read and had gazed over geography books, studying many different peoples and countries. "I do not recall this one. Where is this land? Is this a place that is real, like Nigeria is real or Norway is real?"

"Michigan," the woman sighed. "Yes, it is a real place close to Canada. Perhaps you heard of Canada? The big country?" The Adder nodded silently, mesmerized.

"How do you speak my language?" The Adder inquired, his eyes wide - perhaps the white woman had really been possessed by Xango or another deity. Perhaps that deity was helping her speak. "I have never met a white who spoke my language before."

The woman smiled but her smile seemed to dissolve quickly as memories rushed upon her. Her face, previously composed, proper, melted into despair and tears appeared at the corners of her eyes. She gasped, breathing in and out in long gusts, pressing her hair against the pillar against which she was tied naked with thick rope.

"I was a poor woman," she said. "My husband came to my city, saw me at a club where women dance for men and asked me for marriage. He was sixty-seven and I was seventeen, but I agreed. I didn't want to live in that city anymore. So, we were married and I came here to Nigeria ... but I did not love him. No, even when I used to live in my city - "

"You were poor?" The Adder interrupted in disbelief. "Are not all whites filled with dollar bills that they piss out of themselves? Do they not control the people, banks, women - everything?"

"I was poor," she replied, her voice firmer now, as if she had regained some of the strength inside her. "But my husband came and took me, *showed me a better life*. But I was a body to him, a young woman he could use. I am his concubine more than his wife."

At this point, Zidane ran inside the house, shouting at the top of his lungs: "The Adder must let her go! The

Adder must let her go! Do you not see? Do you not see? She is possessed by the spirit of Xango! She is possessed and we must let her be!" These words squealed as if by a dying pig, Zidane raced out of the house to the howling wind outside, joining his comrades in prayer. *How could a white woman speak Yoruba if she were not possessed?*

The Adder sighed and returned his gaze to the woman. He would have to get one of the men from outside to come in, to hold the camera and tape him while he performed the act. The tape would then have to be taken to the Doctor for him to send on to the Norwegian. He would have to think of something soft, something to make this experience tolerable. Was this any worse than cutting off the fingers of a child? Killing a child?

"I fell in love here in Nigeria," the white woman said. "I fell in love with a man who works for us as our housekeeper and butler, our own house servant. He is a man like you, from a village close to here. He suffered like you - like *me*. I speak Yoruba because of him, because we speak it together as we lie in bed and dream. Strange lands we dream up, children, homes, places we live together as man and wife."

"But the Doctor said, if your husband does not pay, I should do this."

"The Doctor is your master?"

"I do not have a master. This man you love, he taught you to speak Yoruba?"

"Yes."

"And you love him?"

"Yes. I love a Yoruba."

"I have killed many men and women, and even a child," The Adder said to himself, "but I have never raped a woman before." He gazed down at his shriveled member, still inactive.

At this point, Zidane ran into the home again, his hands raised to the skies: "The Adder must let her go! The Adder must let her go! Do you not see? Do you not see? She speaks Yoruba! She must be possessed by Xango! She is possessed by Xango!"

The Adder paused, gazing at his feet, looking over at his clothes. He walked to the heap of clothes and dressed himself. Then, turning to Zidane with a thoughtful expression: "Yes...yes...yes...we must let her go...she truly is possessed by the spirit of Xango..."

That night, they deposited the white woman, dirty, naked and hungry, in front of the white man's house and drove away as another man, black as night, ran to her and held her close to his chest, the two crying in the street, melting into one form as the kidnappers disappeared forever into an abyss, returning to the hatred and biting, gnashing teeth of the unbearable heat of the Nigerian night.

11. WORKER BEES

Nine thirty at night. She's talking again. *Blah, blah, blah*. He doesn't listen anymore. Her words have become a sort of background noise. Who can listen to someone just talkin' on and on? His Father had taught him: never listen to a woman. Three rules. Three simple rules to live your life by. Rule #1: Never listen to a woman. Rule #2: Keep it simple stupid. Rule #3: Live like you're a star. Great rules to live by. At this precise moment, he is applying Rule #1. A woman is talking. He is not listening.

The door bell rings and Valmirra stops talking. She goes to the door. She's a well-rounded girl. Nice ass. He smokes a cigarette. Sits there wondering: *what the hell is going on in the world?* Hasn't read the newspaper in a long time. Doesn't really even know who is President anymore.

"It's Vladimir," Valmirra announces from the door. "He looks worried."

Pierrino gets up off the couch and goes to door. Vladimir is there, looking like his mother had been hit by a bus. Big fella. Maybe three hundred pounds.

"*It's my landlord!*" Vlad belts out. "The piece of shit refuses to let me slide!"

"Slide?" Pierrino asks.

"Slide!" Vladimir shouts back. "I need some time to get some money! I don't have it!"

Pierrino looks at Valmirra. She's telling him "no" with her eyes.

"I don't have it," Pierrino states. "Sorry."

Vlad turns around and walks away without looking back, gets in his car and drives off. There's a possibility he won't be at work the next day. Probably drink himself to sleep. Wake up hung over.

"He's not going to be at work tomorrow," Valmirra observes. "He'll probably drink himself to sleep. Wake up hung over."

Valmirra closes the door and takes her clothes off. Time for her shower. She does that sometimes. Drops all her clothes in the middle of the living room. She looks amazing.

"I'm lucky to be your guy," Pierrino observes. "Damn lucky."

She smiles. He follows her to the bathroom and they do it on the floor. They fall asleep together, lying there. Exhausted after a day of labor. He works at a factory, carrying boxes. She works as a seamstress. She wakes up first the next day. Slaps him in the face.

"Get up," she says.

He shakes the cobwebs loose and gets dressed. Puts his shoes on and heads to work. Traffic is crazy. Valmirra is sitting next to him in her overalls, pissed.

"Another day at work," she says.

"Fuck," he replies.

He drops her off at the factory where she works and continues on to the factory where he works. Gets out of the car and smokes a cigarette in front of the factory. He's a half hour early. Vladimir pulls into the parking lot, smashing into a concrete divider. Opens the door to the car and puts his head out. Vomits on the ground. Then, gets out of his car and stumbles over.

"Perry," Vladimir moans, his breath wreaking of alcohol. "It's me - it's your boy."

Pierrino nods.

"Piece of shit tried to kick me and my family out of our apartment," Vladimir continues. "I taught him a lesson, though."

Vlad's shirt is covered with blood.

"Did you beat the shit out of the landlord?" Perry asks.

"Yeah," Vladimir responds. "Cops will be here any minute. Here to pick up old Vlad."

The whistle sounds and they enter the factory together. Follow a crowd of lost souls into the building.

Fucking workdays. All the same. Work pisses him off. Pierrino gets angrier and angrier as the day wears on. He can't stand it. The noise. The sounds of the machines. People yelling at each other. Bullshit politics. The police arrive about halfway through the workday. They handcuff Vlad and lead him away. He keeps his head down. He shouldn't be ashamed - he was fighting to keep his family warm.

"What did he do?" the boss asks.

"Killed his landlord," one of the cops replies. "Couldn't make rent."

The workday goes on. The bell sounds. Seven o'clock.

"Used to be we worked till five o'clock," an old timer bitches.

They leave the factory together, all the workers. Pile out. His hands hurt like hell. Picks up Valmirra. She looks just as exhausted.

"You hear anything about Vlad?" She asks.

"Got arrested."

"For what?"

"Murder."

"Killed the landlord?"

"Yeah."

"We should have given him money."

"Yeah."

They get home and he opens the door. He's only twenty-three but his muscles ache like hell. Valmirra is only twenty. She bitches like an old woman. She's bitching about something when the doorbell rings. Pierrino gets up off the couch and answers the door. It's Betty and Sue. Betty is Vlad's wife. Sue is the daughter. Their eyes are hollow. They're the living dead.

"What's up?" Pierrino asks.

"Perry," Betty says, "Vlad's been arrested. Have you heard?"

"Yep."

"Me and Sue don't have a place to stay."

"I figured as much."

"Can we stay here?"

"Wait a second."

Pierrino goes to the kitchen to speak with Valmirra. She tells him that they can't stay over. He tries to convince her to allow them to stay but she says that they can't. Pierrino goes back to the door. He feels guilty. His heart aches. Valmirra said they didn't have any obligation to give Vlad the rent. After all, everybody is responsible for their own bills.

"I can't let you stay," he says.

Mother and child beg him. Betty gets down on her knees. She says that she'll do anything. *Anything*. Just for a place to stay. Their faces are red. They're cold.

"Wait here," he says.

He goes back to the kitchen and tells Valmirra that mother and child are kneeling outside. They're begging. They're begging him as if he is some sort of deity. He tells Valmirra that there is no way in Hell he'll deny these two women a place to stay. Valmirra finally agrees. She's pissed. But she's always pissed anyways. Pierrino heads back to the door.

"You can stay here," he says.

Betty and Sue hug him. Thank him. He leads them to the living room and tells them they can sleep on the couch. Gets them some blankets. Warms some milk up for them in the microwave. He sits and talks with them.

"I can't believe he actually killed the man," Betty whispers in a monotone voice. She is gazing at an empty corner of the house.

"I can't believe Daddy was so *mad*," Sue says. "We could've stayed in the car."

"Daddy didn't want you sleeping in a car," Pierrino interjects. "That's why he got mad."

"Now, he's going to go to jail forever. My husband - the *prisoner*."

Pierrino turns the TV on. It's an old cowboy program. The cowboys have to find the Indians. Have to kill

them. The Indians have been striking at their fort. They're in the middle of the desert, following tracks to the Indian camp. Soon, they find the camp. The main character is a tough, grizzly sort. Not John Wayne but someone just like him. Someone cut out of steel. A hard man. The other characters look up to him. Follow him unquestioningly. Eventually, the group of cowboys arrive at the Indian camp and mayhem ensues. Its a gun battle. The Indians are shooting arrows and the cowboys are shooting their pistols. The main character single-handedly kills forty Indians or so. Pierrino loses track of how many.

"Jesus, this is so much bullshit," Betty mutters.

"What is?" he asks.

"This television crap. They make it seem like violence is the answer for everything."

He shuts off the television and goes into the bedroom. Valmirra is lying in bed, naked, smoking a joint. She's opened a bottle of jack and poured herself one. He grabs the bottle and a glass off the nightstand. Pours himself a drink too and takes a couple hits off the weed.

"This is good shit," Valmirra says. "I'm stoned as hell."

"Yeah," he replies.

They make love. Gently this time. Not like last night. Soft and sweet. He caresses her face, kisses her soft lips, tells her he loves her. He bites her neck. Little bites. After its all done, they hold each other with eyes closed. He's careful not to fall asleep. He knows that falling asleep will piss her off. He holds her, kisses her, whispering a soft prayer. He's so *lucky*.

12. IMMIGRANT

My Grandfather's name was Fernando. He was born in a small village in Mexico. No one knows anything about who his parents were. All we know was that they were poor and that they couldn't read or write - at least we assume that because my Grandfather couldn't read or write. Not even his own damn name. He had our family's blood, though, and that meant that he was crazy. In any case, he used to work as a dishwasher in the kitchen of a

major hotel housing thousands of European tourists and businessmen. The owner of the hotel was a very powerful man. Lets call him Mr. X.

One day, Mr. X heard that his friend Mr. Darkness was running for the office of Governor. Well, Mr. X wanted Mr. Darkness to win. After all, imagine the goodies that Mr. X could get himself from the local government - tax breaks, disposing of waste without questions asked, maybe even free electricity from state-owned electrical companies. To get Mr. Darkness elected, Mr. X came up with an evil plan. First, he conjured up the Devil. He killed several lambs, hung them upside down and let their blood drip onto the soil. Then, he screamed out into the night a chant that had not been heard since Jesus Christ himself had died. Anyways, the Devil told Mr. X how to get Mr. Darkness elected. The plan was simple. All Mr. X had to do was get all of his hotel employees to vote for Mr. Darkness. Simple enough. Back in those days, in that part of Mexico, people had to vote in public. They had to stand in front of a municipal city council and scream out their votes.

The reason for this "open voting" was nominally to avoid fraud by having people show up in person, registering people's fingerprints, hearing them out loud, etc. The real reason was so people like Mr. X could control the voting. Mr. X called all of his employees and assembled them in a hotel conference room. The biggest room in the whole hotel. He stood behind a podium, wearing black gloves and a brown suit with a black tie.

"My slaves!" he screamed out. "Tomorrow, there will be a vote between a People's Party Candidate and my candidate, my friend, Mr. Darkness. As you all know, I will be present at the city council watching the vote. I want each and every one of you *to vote*. Anyone who does not vote for Mr. Darkness does so *at his own peril*."

Now, in 21st Century America, people would interpret "peril" to mean that you might suffer a fine at work or lose a paycheck. Well, Mr. X meant something very different. Mr. X meant that any motherfucker crazy enough to pull some nutty shit like voting for someone other than Mr. Darkness would get his fucking head chopped off. All the workers understood what they had to do. My Grandfather Fernando went home that night. He was short, with piercing green eyes. He had been a boxer in his early days. He had competed in the ring as a lightweight. That was back in the days when Julio Cesar Chavez (still listed by most magazines as one of the

greatest of all time) was knocking everyone out in the ring, when he was a national and international celebrity.

Well, Grandpa Fern went home and sat in front of the TV. A fight between Muhammad Ali and some bum was on. Muhammad was dancing under those lights. People have compared Muhammad Ali to Fred Astaire. The way he would dance around his opponents, taking shots at them at just the right time is breathtaking. It made audiences go wild, seeing the sheer beauty of it. My Grandfather worshipped Cassius Clay. He even named one of his ten children Cassius. I think it must have been because Cassius Clay never took shit from any one. He refused to be what anyone wanted him to be. He just rose into the sky and exploded like fireworks every time he was in the ring.

My Grandpa was sitting there watching Muhammad dance, seeing this man who refused to be called Cassius Clay anymore, who would dance around the ring taking shots, screaming "what's my name?" at his opponents. That must have been when the idea came to him. If Cassius Clay chose who he was . . . If Cassius Clay could assert his humanity, why couldn't he do the same thing? Why *shouldn't* he do the same thing?

The following day, he showed up at the municipal council wearing a suit. He had been sitting in the very back of the room, watching all of his co-workers stand in front of the council members. Watching every single one of them declare their vote for Mr. Darkness (who would go on to win, unfortunately). When it came to Grandpa Fernando's turn, he stood in front of the council with his chest puffed out.

"I declare my vote for the People's Party!" he stated in a firm, even tone. He had gazed at the council President as he said these words. Looked at the man right in the eyes. The council President was a patrician. Of course. He had taken off his glasses, set them down, and gazed intently at this little man. The other council members had looked to the President for guidance but the President simply said the following words: "Fine - put his vote down for the People's Party. It isn't going to change a damn thing anyways."

My Grandpa smiled and walked out of the city council. Some years later, Muhammad Ali would get drafted into Vietnam by the U.S. government. But Ali wasn't Joe Louis. Whereas the "Brown Bomber" had simply accepted being called to war and had become a national hero serving in World War II, Muhammad was the "Louisville Lip" and he wasn't about pleasing anyone. Standing in front of a draft board, being called to stand

forward, Muhammad refused to go. Ali took his case all the way to the Supreme Court and won (see the case Ali vs. the United States). I like to see my Grandfather's courage in standing in front of that City Council casting his vote as a precursor (in some karma kind of way) to Ali's courage standing in front of that draft board to refuse induction.

Well, the story doesn't end well. As my Grandpa was leaving, he was met by Mr. X. And Mr. X told my Grandpa that he was finished, he was going to have to do something else to raise all his kids because he was fired. It doesn't end there. He was snatched up by four muscular men and stuffed into a car. They dragged him inside an abandoned building and beat the shit out of him. They broke his nose, his jaw and several of his ribs. My Grandma told me that he came home looking like a tomato. His face was huge, puffed out and red. He was covered in blood.

But he was smiling. A toothless smile.

"You're crazy!" My Grandma had shouted at him, seeing this bloody man enter her home. He was. Without a job, he went back to boxing for cash. A couple fights here and there. Eventually, he became a brick layer. His nose never healed and he spent the remainder of his days with the same toothless smile. His hands looked as if they were made of rocks themselves, so rough they were hard to hold. My Grandmother finally got sick of him and left him. He was married to a woman named Laura for a while but she got sick of him too.

So, he came North. My dad was able to get him papers (I will never know how) and he came to America at sixty-three years of age. I had heard the stories about him but I have to say that my first impression of him, standing in that airport, was that he was a simpleton. He stayed with our family a week, made friends with some of the Mexicans who worked at a local warehouse, and heard about a job as a mechanic in Detroit. He had worked as a mechanic in his youth, so he knew cars. And just like that, in matter of weeks, he was gone.

I went to visit him in Detroit three years after he had arrived. He was sixty-six, working as a mechanic for a guy named Raul. He was living with a forty-five-year-old local woman named Rachel O' Daniels. She was the owner of a local saloon. Apparently, she had been abused by her ex-husband and had met my Grandpa shortly after her divorce. I remember sitting across from her and my Grandpa. She was a redhead with green eyes. Seeing them together, both with green eyes, staring at me, made me feel as if I was being observed by two exotic cats.

Rachel talked a mile a minute, without stopping. Grandpa kept his mouth shut, smiled, and drank whiskey from the bottle. As old as he was, he spoke English. A broken sort of English but enough that he could communicate with his live-in girlfriend.

"You seem very sad," Rachel said to me, gazing into my eyes. "Are you always like this?"

She looked at my Grandpa and he nodded. *Still smiling*. I wanted to strangle him. He had suffered through so much - how could he just *smile* like that? I left their home in frustration. Maybe I had hoped that seeing someone as broken as my Grandpa - someone who had gotten nothing but shit his entire life - would make me feel better. Instead, I had found a happy, toothless old man living with a semi-attractive woman twenty years younger than him, still standing tall. I left in disgust and returned to Flint.

I slept downtown that day, cramped inside my Ford Taurus. Finally, I just drove back to the apartment I shared with my girlfriend. I went back to my regular life. School and work. Political Science and lifting crates. About a year after that, I was at the job in the warehouse when my supervisor Jake came and got me. I put the box down and followed him into the factory office.

"It's your old man," Jake told me. "Seems like something happened to your Grandpa."

I answered the phone and heard the news. Old Fernando had died. Sixty-seven years old. His heart had just given out on him. I stood there with the phone in my hand and wondered if a fighter's heart, one that works so hard at living life with courage, might wear out faster than a cowardly heart that feels sad all the time.

13. A FLINT GIRL, A.K.A. SWEET LOVE STORY

In the Netherlands, no team is bigger than PSV Eindhoven, the Dutch pride and joy, a scrappy band of miscreants who occasionally reach the finals of the Champion's League. Its team is a mish-mash of peoples, cultures, bloods and hearts. No player is as beloved by the people of the Netherlands as Julio Salazar, a Honduran national transferred to PSV from Real Madrid after a less than stellar performance at Europe's legendary club. The five-foot-ten, one-hundred-fifty-four-pound Salazar grew to a more muscular one-hundred-seventy-pounds while

retaining his speed and developing a more precise kick that could send the ball into the goal from several hundred yards.

It goes without saying that he became a media sensation in Amsterdam, his portrait appearing daily in the papers, Dutch girls with red boots and bright blonde hair swooning over the handsome Honduran. The magazine *Dutch Footballer* came to request his presence at a small warehouse downtown, a short distance from the Van Gogh museum, to take his picture for a photo spread.

"Turn to the right, very slightly," the photographer hissed with his pleasant lisp. "You have such a beautiful form. Of all the footballers I've captured, you are one of the ones with the finest body, if I do say so myself."

"Thank you," the Honduran replied humbly. "Have you captured many athletes?"

"Of course. I've photographed footballers, boxers, runners, and even some famous American athletes who came to Amsterdam."

"What boxers did you photograph?"

"Have you heard of Julio Cesar Chavez?"

"Yes, the Mexican."

"Turn to the right just a little bit more."

He liked having his picture taken, being a symbol for something. He couldn't say what he symbolized but he felt like he represented a new type of man. Eventually, Salazar left the warehouse and proceeded to his city apartment, located near the Hilton. He entered the brick structure and proceeded to the second floor. He entered his apartment. The walls were exposed brick and the floor was covered by a soft brown carpet. His walls were decorated with paintings by Mexican artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. His living room had a couch and television, and the apartment had one bedroom and one bathroom.

The Mexicans have a deep-seated hatred of the Central Americans, viewing them as invaders who cross their borders to reach the United States as well as exporters of crime and violence to Mexico. He'd been called numerous ugly names by Mexican teammates at Pumas in Mexico and Real Madrid in Spain. Yet, his music

collection was composed almost entirely of Mexican singers and his walls were decorated with Mexican art. He liked the shame he felt looking at and listening to those Mexican things. The humiliation motivated him, made him stronger. Sitting down on his couch, he thought about Mexico City. When he played at Pumas, he used to go out with his friends. Occasionally, the Mexicans who discovered that he was Honduran would spit on him and he would get in a fight, but mostly he just enjoyed the clubs and bars. He also enjoyed the Mexican women. His cell phone rang.

"Hello?"

"It's me, Vladimir," a voice with a thick Russian accent declared. "Some of the gang are going out to a house party later. Michael is coming and so is François."

"I can't go."

"Why not?"

"I just got out of a photo shoot for *Dutch Footballer* and I don't want to be tired for our flight tomorrow. I'm tired from posing."

The team was flying out to Sydney, Australia, the following day to promote the growth of the sport Down Under, where Australian Rules Football filled the stadiums and dominated the hearts of the population. The team would be playing against the Sydney team to help the small soccer league get some attention. PSV was getting paid to do advertising. Vladimir insisted that the team would have a full day of rest once they had arrived in Australia, but Julio Salazar maintained that he would need time to adjust to the time change. Vladimir said that he didn't need to worry too much because Australians can't play the game too well. The Sydney team was a fluff team. Julio maintained that he was trying to get on the coach's good side after a series of mediocre performances recently. Finally, Vladimir gave up and hung up.

Julio Salazar was alone with his own thoughts again, alone enough to confess to himself his real reason for refusing to go out. He wanted to just sit and think. He had a lot on his mind. One person in particular kept invading his thoughts . . . Amy Hawk, the American reporter he had met at a hash bar several weeks before. She had wanted to ask him about footballers and fashion. Closing his eyes, he imagined her face (the soft red lips, the tanned skin,

the arched eyebrows), her voice (a raspy, surprisingly deep voice for a woman). As soon as the pictures from *Dutch Footballer* were e-mailed to him for his approval, he would forward them to her and ask her what she thought about them. He would ask her if he was right, if he really was a symbol for a new kind of man. He found his grey laptop on his red sofa and sat next to it. He turned on the television, tuning in to the Sky Sports channel to listen for any developments in the soccer world. Opening his laptop, he navigated to his e-mail page and accessed his account, searching for her most recent e-mail.

Dear Julio,

It's me, Amy. Just wondering when we are getting together next. I miss talking to you. I saw a bird this morning, bright blue. I miss Amsterdam and can't wait to get the hell out of Detroit. There are more trees here but this is no place for a reporter.

I was thinking about what you told me about Honduras, how when you were a little boy all the other boys used to try to get you to join them but you didn't. I remember how I asked you if it was because you knew you were going to make it as a soccer player but you said "no, its because I thought their tattoos all over their faces were ugly" and then you laughed. You laughed but I knew that the real reason was that you knew you were going to make it because you have talent.

Well, I feel the same way. I feel like I'm going to make it. Make it big. I don't feel like sitting around waiting for them to find out. I want to move to Europe, make them see me, make them see how great I am.

How is everything going? I'll call you later. - Amy

He closed the laptop and thought about whether he had really refused to join the other boys because he knew he was going to make it. He decided that he had been scared of them, the bangers with their prison face

tattoos, their scars, their disregard for life. Reaching into his back pocket, he removed his wallet and opened it, finding a piece of notebook paper which he removed and unfolded. He found a poem that Amy had written for him. Amy's dad was a Chippewa Indian. The Chippewa have thousands of names for natural phenomena.

A thousand names for love we have in our language,

But for you there is one, my love: Faith,

Faith,

Faith because I never knew strength,

But now I do,

Faith in a better life, in my happiness, in nature.

My father's face, filled with cracks,

The day my mother died,

My father found her,

We moved from our home.

Faith.

Because my faith was lost that day.

Now, it flows like the Nile,

With such strength,

Because of You.

I thank God because of you.

When my mother died, we moved to a motel on the edge of this town.

I felt like I was going to be trapped in that room forever.

But now I don't.

He folded the piece of paper, blessed it with a kiss and gently placed it back inside his leather wallet, making sure to position the paper in the middle of the wallet so that it couldn't be bent. He stared at that yellow piece of notebook paper with blue lines for another thirty seconds before closing the wallet and placing it back in the back pocket of his skin-tight blue jeans.

She was going to be there in Sydney, waiting for him. He didn't want to go out with Vladimir because he couldn't bear to meet another woman, didn't want to risk the possibility of cheating. He trusted himself, knew that he could deny the most attractive Dutch beauty but he still didn't want to risk it.

He watched television for another forty-five minutes. Manchester United was playing Liverpool. Lucas Leiva, a midfielder, scored against Man U. Rafael evened the score for Man U and the match went into the second half tied at 1-1. Bellamy pushed Rooney and Rooney pushed back. The two seemed to be ready to start a fight but their teammates held them back.

Salazar liked the English, the only Europeans who truly appreciated boxing. As a Central American, he had few heroes and tended to admire the Mexican athletes. No Central American had ever distinguished himself as a truly world class player on the same level as greats like Pelé or Beckenbauer, the legends of the sport. His region of the world had boxers. They seemed to like beating each other up, sending each other into an early grave.

At first, there had been the Honduran civil war. Far-right dictators had battled communist guerillas. His childhood had been populated with missing hands dancing before his eyes, severed heads that seemed to speak to him in his dreams. His adolescence saw the arrival of a new demon, the gang epidemic as the children of the old communists gravitated towards disillusionment and the MS-13 blossomed alongside other gangs too numerous to list. His adolescence had been populated with missing hands as well, tattooed with strange symbols in black ink.

His brother. He'd been to visit him at the jail. All the prisoners had been standing around a television watching a Will Smith film, the prison walls decorated with bright graffiti, bright blues and greens with names of

famous gang leaders. Some of the prisoners had been lifting weights, others smoking marijuana or sharing needles as they shot heroin. Juan, his brother . . . sitting on a bench with a girl who couldn't be more than fifteen years old, his girlfriend. Juan's body had been marked by scars and tattoos, track marks. Most of the tattoos were standard gang tattoos but one in particular had attracted his attention - a tattoo of the boxer Ricardo Mayorga, the craziest Central American ever to enter the boxing world. Mayorga would smoke a cigarette and drink a bottle of champagne after every fight he won. Salazar's first e-mail to Amy had discussed this meeting with his brother:

Amy, how is everything?

Yes, I do think that family is important. I have no family, actually. They were all killed. I saw my mother killed when I was about sixteen years old. I never actually knew my father - maybe that's why I think that family is important. I don't want any child of mine ever to grow up like I did.

I have a brother but he is not a good person. The last time I saw him, he asked me for money. His body was covered with tattoos. You know, gang tattoos, like those you see on television. He had a teardrop tattooed next to his eye, which means he killed someone. He's a murderer. I remember every little bit of that conversation.

I asked my brother what he was doing with his life, and he looked at me and said "nothing, what else? Why do I have to do anything?" like it was natural not to do anything with your life. I can't live like that. I always have to be doing something.

What about you? OMG, by the way - coach said I was his little fighter today. Coach is British, you know. They love boxing. I think he must have been thinking about a fighter. My brother has a tattoo of Ricardo Mayorga. Well, look at me rambling on ... I miss you.

The doorbell rang.

Salazar got up off the couch and answered the door.

"Hey buddy. What's up?" A boisterous, red face said. It was his friend Randy, a six-foot-four chubby musician, living in Amsterdam to play drums for a European record company, laying tracks down for Europop celebrities. Randy looked like the stereotypical Yankee with his NFL t-shirt, baggy shorts and baseball cap. He smiled big and waddled as he walked. He liked to slap Salazar on the back and call him "buddy."

"I'm good," Salazar replied. Something about Randy's aggressive friendliness made him nervous. He couldn't say why exactly. "How are you?"

"*Spectacular!*" Randy sang, chuckling. "Simply *spectacular!* What an *amazing* day it is today, huh? Not a cloud in the sky. What have you been up to, homie?"

"Homie . . . well, homie, I don't know - just left a photo session. They are putting me on the cover of *Dutch Footballer*. How about you, homie? What have you been up to? Anything of note?" Salazar started to scratch his neck. Randy released a burst of shattering laughter, slapping Salazar on the shoulder multiple times. Then, he wiped sweat off his brow.

"Oh, buddy, dawg, you have no clue!" Randy replied. "Dude, you have to listen to what I'm about to tell you. Dude, it was crazy. Bro, this chick was *dope*. I have to tell you about her."

"Dope? She was on drugs?"

"No, buddy, she *was* dope not *on* *dope*. Get it?"

"No."

"She was *hot*, buddy. She was a beaner like you, Mexican. Born in California. She's a studio musician. I think I'm in love, dude."

"Have you slept with her?"

"No, but she had this hot Swedish chick with her and I slept with the Swedish chick. So, sort of screwed up there. I was crazy wasted, drank a lot, you know? Had a little too much of the beast and ended up sleeping with her friend. I don't think she knows about it, though, 'cause I saw her at the studio the next day and she was mad cool."

Randy pushed his way into the apartment and sat on the couch, putting his feet up on the coffee table, leaning his head back. He reached into his pocket and produced a cigarette pack, pulled a cigarette from the pack

and lit it. He took a few deep drags off his cigarette, failing to notice the absence of an ashtray, but paused after a while to examine Salazar's face. His eyes narrowed and he scratched his goatee.

Randy rose up from the couch and approached Salazar, who was still standing by the open front door. He pressed his nose up against Salazar's nose, gazing into his eyes. Then, he took a few steps back, walking to one side of Salazar. Then, he walked to Salazar's other side. Finally, he crossed his arms.

"You look *different*, buddy," he muttered, his cigarette still on his lips. "*Something* going on with you? You look like you're . . . *happy* . . . like *joyful* or something. You usually walk around like someone died, but today you look *different*. You look friendly and calm or something . . . oh wait a second . . . you're hitting something."

"I look the same."

"What's her name, homie? Bust out the news, dawg." Randy slapped Salazar on the shoulder a few more times, grinning his tar-stained smile. "Spit it out. Don't try to hold anything from your buddy, the Randster."

"I'm not in love, Randy," Salazar replied.

"But you are dating, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"So . . . spit it out. Who is she?"

Salazar paused. How to describe Amy? Her skin was the color of a walnut, her hair as black as night and she had a sort of warmth that was hard to describe. It was like being seven years old, coming in from a cold day, wet with cold water from a recent rain, and having your mother hand you a blanket. You wrap that blanket around you and you shrink into a corner in your room, becoming as small as possible, wrapping that blanket around you as tightly as you can, like only you and the blanket exist. He remembered the e-mail she had sent in response to his e-mail discussing his meeting with his brother at the jail in Honduras:

Dear Julio,

Yes, family is really important to me too. My mother was a prostitute in Flint, Michigan, when she was a little girl, like seventeen or eighteen years old. She met my dad while he was working at a video store there, probably the

first Chippewa ever to work at that store. They fell in love and they moved in together. Soon after that they moved from Flint to the Chippewa Reservation outside of Saginaw.

My mom never forgot those memories. They haunted her. She couldn't shake those memories of being used like that. Even after she was a housewife and everything, she would fall into a deep depression and start crying for no reason. So, one day, my dad and I came home and she was on the kitchen floor, lying still. Everything seemed like it was moving in slow motion.

She had swallowed some pills and cut her own wrists. She died there and we moved back to Flint, just my dad and me. We stayed at this roach motel where all these prostitutes would work and poor immigrant boys sold drugs. It was just me and my dad. I never felt so lonely in my life.

My dad would work as a dishwasher at a restaurant. Every night he would come back to our room alone and drink himself to sleep, crying. He did that until I was old enough to go live on my own. I would pat him on his back and tell him everything was going to be o.k.

God, I miss you. Julio, I miss you so much.

Amy

Salazar stared at Randy. Randy was staring back at him with a big smile, waiting for some kind of answer. Randy repeated himself: "Who is she? Spit it out?"

"She's *no one*," Salazar replied, smiling.

Randy paused and, suddenly, he wasn't Randy anymore. He was serious. His set lips relaxed and his joyous eyes fell dead. His forehead lost all of its creases and his hands fell by his sides. The sweat, always present on his rotund face, seemed to come in a torrential downpour.

"*Don't say that*," he whispered. "Don't say that, Julio. You can say that you don't want to talk about it, but don't say its *nothing*. Because it is *something*. *Something* great. *Something* fabulous that touches you like a fire

blazing, burning your house down. I never told you this, man, but when I was a kid, I used to collect baseball cards. Used to love them. Buy them all the time. Spent every dime I had on baseball cards, Julio. Well, my dad comes home drunk one day and trips over my book of baseball cards - it was like a little book where you glue the baseball card onto the page, like a collector's book. Well, gee golly, God Almighty, if he didn't kick that book all the way across the living room and I came out of my room screaming 'Leave my cards alone! Leave my cards alone!' Well, that just got the old man riled up even more. He took off his belt and he gave me the beating of a lifetime. But that wasn't the worst of it, you see. If that was it, it would be o.k. But he took the book of cards and he threw it in the fireplace and let it burn. To this day, all the other good things that my daddy did for me, I can't look at him in the face."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because . . . a couple of years ago, my dad asked me what happened to my book of baseball cards and I told him *nothing* happened to it. My mom asked me about it too and I told her the same thing. My uncles asked me about it and I told them the same thing . . . but I was lying, man, because *something* did happen. So, finally, I met a woman and I let her know everything about me, who I am, really deep inside . . . and she asked me to tell her the life experience that hurt the most. So, I told her . . . *nothing*."

"You didn't say anything about the cards."

"No, I didn't want to show my most vulnerable side to her. So, I said something else. I can't remember what I said, something that really didn't matter. So she left me. The first woman that I had a real connection with and she left me because I couldn't tell her. But it wasn't *nothing*. It was *something*. Sometimes, if we say that something is nothing, it screws us up inside, it kills us. Its the way God lets us know the value of honesty."

"What do you want from me? What is all this about?"

"Something. Not nothing. You don't have to tell me about it . . . you can tell me you don't want to talk about it, but *something* is happening to you. Its all over your face. I see it, man. *Something* is happening to you and you need to realize that. Embrace it, because its beautiful."

Randy and Julio Salazar sat together in silence, in the dark. Neither of them dared utter a sound. Finally,

Julio turned to Randy and placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered: "Yes, *something*, Randy. *Something*. Like a light. Like a chance for some magic, finally, after tears and blood and murder. Some magic came to me . . . *the exit from this fucking cave.*"

14. OUTSIDE FLINT, WHERE A HALF-WHITE, HALF-BLACK TRAILER PARK HUNTER DOES NOT BELONG AT ALL!

It's time for our yearly hunting trip again and my head is *aching* so bad. I can't believe that he wants to do this again. Doesn't he realize how embarrassing this all is to me? Doesn't he care about how I feel? He's in the kitchen. Short, chubby with his black skin. This is my father. The only black hunter in Michigan. Mamma was white but she's gone now. My daddy. Wrapped up in a coat with fur skin. Cowboy boots and hat. He packs the truck full of supplies with Gabe's dad. Blankets, water bottles and shotguns. Boxes of food so we can sit in the middle of the woods and freeze our asses off waiting for deer. Unlike my dad, Gabe's dad is huge and white with a pot belly and bright red sideburns.

About a year ago, I was listening to Smashing Pumpkins with my buddy Mike Fisher in our trailer's living room when I saw Gabe's dad outside, drunk, wearing a Scottish skirt, playing the bag pipes. For no reason at all. Other than he was crazy, of course. The whole ritual of the hunt is stupid. The deer has no chance of surviving. We're armed with shotguns and the deer is armed with his antlers. I just put on my headphones and sit on the curb.

Gabe is my best friend. It would have been nice if he was going, but the son of a bitch was able to get out of it this year. He said he had a big test coming up and had to study. Gabe's dad isn't as good as mine is at catching a lie. I dream about my sweet Lisa. Last time, we made love in the back yard of her house. Her parents are Mormons. Real strict, so I'm not allowed *inside* the house. She's so beautiful I can't believe she's with me. She has these big green eyes. Always full of understanding. Last month, she drove me to a club in Saginaw and we saw a band play. We smoked weed and made out in the car. She was dressed all in black with eyeliner. I never dress like that. I'm always just dressed normal - flannel shirt, fuzzy coat, unkempt hair. Just boring old me.

Now, I'm going to the middle of *nowhere* with my dad and Gabe's dad - the two strangest mother-fuckers I have ever known. There will be *no* Lisa, *no* friends, and *no* good music. Just me and these two crazy old weirdos. We're inside the car. My dad is driving. I'm sitting next to a case full of hard liquor. Gabe's dad is smoking a joint and my dad is sipping on a beer. They're talking about *mortgages*. They work together, my dad and Gabe's dad. They're cashiers at the local grocery store. Also, they're neighbors. Our trailer is next to their trailer. Gabe and his dad have no ambition. They're happy living here in the boonies. Happy with their trailer and making campfires outside. My dad and I are always *dissatisfied*. We drive for three hours, past trees and more trees. My dad and Gabe's dad keep talking about stupid, mundane things - bills, property prices, etc. Suddenly, the conversation shifts.

"Oh by the way, Bill. You remember Franklin Bonners and Joe Garcia? Yeah, those two dummies who used to work in the stock room in the supermarket? Well, those two idiots got it into their heads to buy an old beat-up Mustang - can't remember the year - and rebuild it. I think it was a model from the late sixties. Turns out the two idiots were actually able to do it. They rebuilt the whole damn thing. Except that they left the car parked outside Joe's trailer and Franklin's son took the car out for a joyride. *Wrecked* the car. One day after they had rebuilt this thing, spent months on this project. Thousands of dollars in savings. Well, Franklin beat the shit out of that boy so bad - he was so mad - that the boy got *slow*. People are saying that the boy's IQ is fucked. He can't go to regular high school, can't do nothing. They're trying to get him some disability. I mean, the boy was just beat to pieces with a pipe."

We stop to eat at a roadside restaurant.

"You all right?" Gabe's dad asks me. He offers me a cigarette.

"I only smoke cloves," I reply.

"Fag shit," my dad sighs.

"Just take the fucking cigarette," Gabe's dad says.

I take the cigarette and light it up. My dad orders me a whiskey on the rocks. He gives me some quarters and lets me put coins in the restaurant juke box. I pick Nine Inch Nails, the song "Head like a Hole." About

halfway through the song, the crowd at the restaurant starts booing. The owner switches the song off.

"Why do you do that?" my dad asks me, perplexed.

"Why do I do what?"

"Why *purposely* piss people off? You know this place ain't the kind of place that's gonna play music like that. Pick something other people will like."

"Like Garth Brooks?" I say sarcastically.

"What's wrong with Garth Brooks?" Gabe's dad asks me. "He's a damn fine singer."

I bang my head gently against the table. I have dreams of going other places - like Los Angeles. I hear that L.A. has a great music scene, beautiful women, amazing weather. I wouldn't mind going to a lot of other places - New York City, Miami, Houston, Seattle, wherever. Places where a half-black, half-white kid from a trailer park can *blossom*, be *accepted*. I'm dying here, outside of Flint. My dad has simpler dreams.

"Some day, Bill, I'm going to start my own business in Flint. Got a brother out there. Lots of money getting made out there. Don't let the media fool you with the stories about poverty. I was born in Flint and I'll die there. But I have an idea, you see . . . satellite television!"

"Satellite TV?" Gabe's dad scoffs. "Who the hell is going to buy some bullshit like that?"

"Its going to be huge!" My daddy replies. "You'll see. I'm *telling* you, Bill. I'm going to get some guys and we're going to install satellite TVs all over the place over. Lots of foreign people in Flint. They want to watch television programs from the old country. Lots of white people who like sports and movie channels. Basketball. Baseball. All types of channels, Bill."

"You think people will pay for extra channels? For a channel that only plays football?"

My dad goes on talking. The way he's talking about it, I believe he's going to do it. When he puts his mind to something, he's unstoppable. He reminds me of Pacman. He's a little ball that just takes whatever it is it wants. Eats it all up. My dad splits the bill with Gabe's dad, and we head off inside the truck. Less than twenty minutes later, we're at the cabin.

"No Lisa Peña or Anna-Marie Bullard here," I announce sarcastically. I made out with Anna-Marie last

month, before I started dating Lisa. Anna-Marie speaks with a fake British accent and meditates. Gabe is dating Sasha Brown, possibly the strangest girl at school and Anna-Marie's best friend. My dad slaps me on the back of the head. He tells me not to be a smart-ass. We carry the materials out of the truck and into the cabin.

I have my walkman on and I'm listening to Pantera. Right now, they're blasting Johnny Cash from the truck. They're singing along. My dad tosses me a bag of magic mushrooms. It's a big bag. Enough for three days of hunting. I take a handful and bite into them. Then, I hand my dad the bag. He eats some and hands the bag to Gabe's dad. They're drinking, smoking weed, joking. Three hours later, I'm sitting on a chair on the porch of the cabin. Gun loaded.

Everybody has to keep quiet. I'm dreaming, high on mushrooms. I'm in the backyard with Lisa, *staring into her eyes*. Holding her. Close. Gabe's dad points to the clearing. His finger is shaky but I follow it anyways. I can see it, the deer. We sneak down to the clearing, my daddy leading the way like a little navy seal. How come people always follow my dad? I'm taller, handsomer, almost white, speak perfectly, get fantastic grades at school but no one *listens* or *follows* me anywhere. They *hate* me. We get within forty feet. He's bent over, eating some grass. My daddy motions to Gabe's dad, telling him to take the shot. Gabe's dad nods and raises his shotgun but the deer moves.

Just another twenty feet away or so. My daddy leads us closer. We step where he has already stepped. Now, we are thirty feet away. He still hasn't seen us. He's a big, majestic creature. Can make plenty of jerky from his carcass. This time, my daddy is motioning for me to take the shot. I do the same thing every time we hunt. This is why I hate to come. Hasn't he realized by now? Doesn't he get it? *I can't do it*. I won't do it. It fucks me up inside. I shot a deer my first time hunting with him. It made me so sick, I puked as we were carrying the carcass to the cabin.

Something about it just doesn't seem right to me. I know they're fucking overpopulated but I don't care. I always shoot just above the deer. Make it seem like I'm trying. I miss on purpose. I haven't killed any deer for a while. I refuse to do it. I just can't do it.

As I'm aiming, the deer turns its head towards me. It looks me dead in the eyes. It starts speaking to me:

"Don't kill me man. I'm just chillin' here, brother." My hands are trembling. The shotgun is shaking. I'm staring at my daddy and he's looking back at me now. He's frowning. He sneaks over to where I'm standing and drops down to the ground, aiming the barrel of his shotgun at the buck. His hands are steady. BANG! The buck slips and falls to the ground. My dad and Gabe's dad rush over to the buck. They each fire another shot into the buck's skull. I drop my shotgun, use my sleeve to wipe the sweat off my face. Then, I pick up the gun and follow them.

"We're some lucky sons of bitches," Gabe's dad shouts. "Ooo-eee!"

We carry the buck up to the cabin and drop his carcass inside. Number one. Others will surely follow as these savage days progress.

15. PARIS FLINTOWN

Walking up and down the Paris streets all day and night without having had any sleep, talking to myself like a lunatic. The shop owners stare and wonder why I just walk up and down the same street *over and over and over* again. I just *walk and walk and walk* and never stop walking. My feet ache. Finally, I give up on talking to myself and just walk. It is my third day in this city. *My third day without sleep*. At some point, I went to see the Code of Hamurabi. The world's first legal code. I was taken back by how similar the structure of the Code is to the U.S. Constitution. Preamble. Mentions of a higher power. A list of rights or laws. Why does humanity have to justify its laws with reference to something existing in the sky? Isn't our own intrinsic worth enough? We're real pieces of work, ain't we?

I stop to eat at a local café and order a meal. They give me a baguette with some lettuce and ham. Seven of these baguettes might actually make a real meal. I look at the waitress as if she is crazy and ask where the rest of the food is. She explains to me that the baguette is my meal! I look around and notice for the first time that most French people are thin as all hell. I leave the café and start walking again. I pass by tourists in some kind of large outdoor garden. I get the impression that this garden is famous for some reason. The temperature is perfect. The tourists are all wearing t-shirts with the words "Louvre" on them. Seeing those t-shirts makes me want to go back,

so I hike it back to the Louvre but the transparent pyramid signaling the entranceway has a line that could take some years out of my life.

I turn away and walk back to the main strip. There is some kind of gallery showcasing works by amateur painters. Three floors. I start at the first floor and work my way up. I see people speaking to the artists but I'm too shy to say a damn thing. What would I say anyways? Their work looks *pretentious* to me, devoid of any real *meaning*.

I leave the art gallery and walk to a small café - "The English Café." I order some Irish coffee and sit at a small table outside. A group of schoolchildren are walking by and I wonder whether their lives are better than mine. They seem so happy, laughing and screaming. Some of them jump on the backs of the others. Piggy back rides. I don't remember laughing and screaming like that as a kid! They speak a fast French, these kid, an exciting language, filled to the brim with explosive joy like BAM! They smile and it is clear from their mannerisms that they are uninhibited. Growing up in Paris, one of the best cities in the world. I curse my parents for not having raised me in Paris. I never talked with some much energy when I was a little kid back home in Flint.

Then, I see a tall skinny man with a bald head and an angry expression. He is wearing a tattered jean jacket. His eyes are weary. There is a tattoo on the summit of his bald head. He is carrying a syringe case. He walks by the children silently. "No," I say to myself. "If I had grown up here, I would have been this guy. Somehow I just know it."

Some people sitting at the table next to me stop eating and stare at me as I start to speak to myself. I could care less. I keep on talking. When I talk to myself, I feel liberated. I feel pretty damn good. I drink a few more Irish coffees and notice that I am drunk as a skunk. As is my custom when I drink, I light myself a cigarette. I wish I was French. There is something so poetic about the way they live their lives. They rarely bathe, let their stubble show, and live for lively discussions. I see them screaming at each other at the cafés along the main strip. So much *life*.

Suddenly, I *fall*. I had left the café and had been walking around. I lunge head first onto the concrete. My face hits the concrete. A Chinese couple pull me up and dust me off, speaking to me in Cantonese. I know not a

word of what they are saying but they seem concerned. "I haven't slept in three days," I tell them. "I'm going to try to find a place to sleep. "

I see the man with the tattooed bald head again! He must live around here. He is still carrying the syringe case. I leave the Chinese couple far behind, following the bald headed man. He is walking into some kind of hotel. He walks past the front desk. I pull out my conversational French book and walk to the concierge. Painstakingly, I go through the laborious process of obtaining a room. The concierge is a rock-and-roller in his sixties.

After some haggling, I am able to get a room. The rooms here are shared. Four people per room. Only twenty-five Euros per night. I pay for one night and get handed a room key. Thanking the concierge, I head upstairs to the room via the elevator. Reaching into my backpack, I pull out a pair of sunglasses and a beret. I had purchased the beret at the airport the same day I had arrived. I am unshaven. Gaze at myself in the mirror on the elevator ceiling.

"I am French now," I say to myself approvingly. I try to think of something to say to myself in French but realize I don't know shit. Getting off on the fourth floor, I proceed to the room. I have absolutely no idea what time it is. I'm *too exhausted* to look at my watch. I just walk in, past my three roommates without saying a word. I find a bed with no stuff on it and lay down. My roommates are staring at me. I stare back without saying anything. They are fourteen, maybe fifteen years old. Skinny. One of them walks over to me with a syringe and dangles it in front of my nose. I pull out my French phrase book and look up the words "no thank you." After a few moments, I give up. "No. Merci." I tell him.

He laughs with his buck teeth and walks back to his comrades. They tie up and shoot up. I just lie in bed and watch them. The display sickens me. Hard to explain why. I'd seen this a *million times* back in Flint. Guess I didn't expect to see it in Paris.

"What the *fuck* is wrong with you guys?" I ask them. "Shouldn't you be playing soccer, spending time with your mamas and your papas? Watching French cartoons?"

They don't understand a word of what I'm saying. They just stare and laugh.

"This is some depressing shit," I continue. "Sitting here, watching this shit. I can't sleep with pieces of shit

like you in the room. Never know what the fuck a junkie is going to do. I left Flint to get away from this shit."

I jump off the bed and proceed to the elevator. Must have a talk with the concierge. Absolutely ridiculous and unacceptable, putting me in a room like this. A man is passed out, laying on the floor of the elevator. He is maybe thirty-five. Probably younger but looks thirty-five. Maybe he's twenty. I get off the elevator and proceed to the front desk. Pulling out my phrase book, I try my best to express myself. He laughs his ass off at me. I start to mime. Mimicking the act of shooting up. He just keeps laughing, bending over, screaming his laughs at the floor.

"I don't speak French, motherfucker," I shout at him. "I don't want to be in a room full of fucking junkies. Just get me another fucking room."

A woman with a mop in her hands walks over to me. She has a veil over her face.

"You speak English?" she asks me. "I study this. I study English."

"Will you please tell this asshole that he gave me a room full of motherfuckin' junkies," I tell her. "I want another room. I don't want to sleep in no room filled with no damn junkies."

"Junkies?" She asks. "What is this 'junkies'?"

"Someone who uses drugs," I explain. I mime the act of sticking needles in your arms. She laughs so hard, bending over and grabbing her stomach, that I think her veil is going to fall off. Her eyes are closed. Finally, she stops and leans against her mop. She wipes tears away from her eyes.

"This motel only for junkies," she says. "Everybody junky."

I look around. Finally, I notice some men passed out on chairs. I see the track marks on the concierge's arms. I remember the man passed out in the elevator, the teenagers in the room.

"Shit," I murmur. "Damn it. I got no other place to stay."

"You make me laugh," she says. I can tell she is smiling behind that veil. "You sleep in my place. I call husband. Tell him it o.k. Good way to practice English. We like to speak this."

She tells me to sit on the stoop outside of the hotel and wait for her to come out. She has a couple more rooms to clean. She'll come and get me when its time to go. I watch the junkies stumble into the place, one after another. Emaciated. Faces covered with bruises and cuts. Some of them are so thin they look as if the wind could

carry them away, like they could be carried to the top of the Eiffel Tower by the breeze! The women look as if they are ready to jump out of a window after a long day of prostitution. This is just like *home*.

Finally, the Muslim woman comes out and tells me to follow her to the subway station. As we are walking, she explains to me that she lives in an Algerian suburb of Paris, her family is very nice, her husband is learning English for business reasons. They want to start a tourism business for Americans visiting France.

"What you do in Paris so far?" she asks me.

"My first day, I bought this beret and then I walked to the Eiffel Tower. They don't let you touch the Eiffel Tower, really. At least not the base. But I climbed up on top of a rock and touched the base because I *had* to, you dig? A jerky police officer told me I had to leave the area. So, I left. Then, I just walked around. Up and down the same street. I ate a baguette with ham."

She smiles politely. As we ride the train to the Algerian *banlieu*, she tells me about some riots they've had recently. Two Turkish youths from a suburb ran into a power station, running away from a beating they were getting from the cops. Both got electrocuted. Eleven people died in the riots that followed.

"My faith in Allah carries me through these hard days," she says, smiling behind her veil. I can tell that she is a good woman with a good soul and I hug her tightly. She pushes me away but keeps smiling behind that veil. Her eyes let me know that.

We get off at a station and I immediately notice that this side of France is different from the one I had come across in the downtown area. I am truly back *home*. Here, there is *graffiti* everywhere. People are not emaciated - they are *fat* but look as if they had worked all day. The kids have faders and French hip hop blasts from boom boxes. Signs in Arabic fill the streets. I follow her into a massive building constructed of grey brick.

"In America, what they call *this*?" she asks me. "This sort of big building? Where poor people live? Government helps pay bill."

"I believe they call it a *project*," I tell her. "A *project*."

"A *project*," she repeats.

We go to the eighteenth floor. She hums some kind of Algerian tune and then proceeds to ask me about my

family, my life. I tell her everything. She lowers her head and stares at the floor of the elevator until we reach our floor. I wonder what she is thinking about. Leading me to a sturdy wooden door, she indicates that this is her home and knocks on the wood. The door swings open and I am confronted by a bald man with a long beard. His eyes are kind.

"Hello," he sings cheerfully. "You welcome my home. Come please."

He leads me to a couch and asks me to sit down. The woman goes into the kitchen. She told me her name but I can't even remember it anymore. The man tells me his name but I immediately forget it. The truth is I can barely remember *my own* name. I think I lied and told them that my name is Frank. I wonder why I did that.

He tells me about his son. The son is named Mamoud. Several pictures of the boy line the walls of the apartment. Mamoud is at the *université* in Marseille studying accounting. He lives with a German woman and they have several children. The woman comes out with two plates of food. She hands one to her husband and the other to me. Then, she disappears into the kitchen and returns with utensils. She hands those to us and we eat sitting down on the couch. She turns on the television, turning to a soccer match.

"You like football?" she asks me.

"Not really," I tell her.

"Today is good game," the man says enthusiastically. "Marseille playing."

He tells me that he cheers for the team in Marseille because his son goes to school there. He goes on and on about soccer as I eat . . . until I can't even hear the word "football" any more. Then, he asks me if I'd fallen in love in Paris.

"No," I tell him. "Haven't really spoken to anyone."

"Love is very important. Without love, what is life?"

"I wish I was French," I confess. "Instead, I'm from Flint."

"No, no," he says, patting me on the shoulder. "You be you."

"I'm really tired," I say. "I haven't slept in a long time."

"Just a drink," he says. "Maybe you meet some girl. Maybe you fall in love."

He smiles and tells me to follow him. He goes to the door and slips on his sneakers. I follow him out of the apartment and out of the building, to a pub across the street from the project. The pub is crowded and we sit at the counter. A tall blonde woman is serving drinks. She hands us menus but I can't recognize any of the beers.

"What they call this?" Mamoud's dad asks me. "Place that makes its own beer?"

"Microbrewery," I tell him. I point to a beer on the menu and the bartender nods. She comes back with two frothy mugs. We drink those beers and then three more each. After a while, I realize that the Algerian food is not sitting well in my stomach and I excuse myself to go to the restroom. I race into a small bathroom and slip off my pants. Crashing down on the toilet seat, I brace myself for a torrent of shit, clenching my teeth. I use up a roll of toilet paper and throw it into the shit-filled bowl. I try to flush but the toilet starts to spew out water like a fountain.

"Damn it to hell," I mutter to myself, pulling up my pants and ducking out of the bathroom. Best strategy is to pretend that nothing happened. Maybe no one would find out that I was the one. Brown water is spilling onto the bathroom floor. It's all a mess. I return to the bar and find Mamoud's dad talking to a pair of *beurettes*, French women of Arabic descent. He introduces me to them with a wink and I do my best to charm them.

I am talking about the Second World War when the tall blonde bartender walks up to me, her face red and angry. She is gesticulating. Speaking a fast, furious French that sounds nothing like the romantic language I had come to love. I just shrug my shoulders and smile.

"She is saying you break restroom," Mamoud's dad says, his face solemn.

With that said, he puts some money on the counter and walks away, leaving me behind to face the bartender alone. The two *beurettes* leave. The entire bar is staring at me. I stare at each patron individually with apologetic eyes. I want to apologize to everybody. I turn to the bartender. Leaning over the bar, I kiss her gently on the lips. She stares at me in confusion.

"I'm sorry," I tell her. I walk out and wander around. I find an empty alley and fall asleep behind a dumpster. I sleep like a baby, dreaming of the waitress, imagining myself as a French father living with her in Paris, the patriarch of a family with several beautiful French sons and daughters. I sleep and sleep and sleep with that wonderful dream, holding it tight against my heart. I returned to Flint the next day. It's all the same shit, ain't

it?

16. THE MEAN CROSSBOW MAN

Ploppity. Plop. The rain has always been something that freaks me the fuck out, makes me weird, gets me to crawl out of bed and hide under the mattress. I have to wait until this mad music stops! Each drop *smashes* onto the tin roof of this hut. I hear these soldiers of water, these kamikazes crashing onto the glass too. Why do they come after me, these men made of water? These teardrops chase me, falling from heaven, flying towards me like bullets shot from a sacred firearm in the clouds. Is God up there firing the shots? *Ploppity. Plop.*

Celia is out there *somewhere*, beautiful and dangerous, her bangs a different color from the rest of her hair, her lips covered with a wonderful and tasty gloss! What was the flavor of that gloss? I can't not even begin to describe it. The elixir of the gods. What does that make Celia? A goddess? I made love to her the first time on a train, racing in the dark, her skirt lifted. I must have kissed her a million times that night . . . her neck and glossy lips and every other part of that soft body.

Dare I leave this hut and venture into the city? On a night like this, the demons are out, climbing out of the gutters, and anything is possible. The air smells of violence and pussy. Not a bad smell. One that I have smelled before on many a night - but a smell that leads to broken hearts and pain and even death in a city like Flint. I grab my coat and head out into the rain, dancing about the streets like Fred Astaire. I grab a lamppost and sing those famous lines. I have no idea where Celia is. She moved out of her apartment shortly after our break-up . . . most likely out of fear that I would *come looking for her*, sing outside of her window, beg that she come back to me. A smart woman. Damn She-Devil. I'm singing to myself. Not Fred Astaire. Not "Singing in the Rain." A different song. Something to make myself feel a little less pain.

Iron Maiden. "Run to the Hills." Great Song. Great Album. Great band. If anyone fucks with you when you're on the Maiden, its *bye bye Señor* because you're fucking with the wrong *hombre*. I can't even begin to tell you how many times that band has saved my life. In bars, as the blood is dripping down my face and the ghouls

have surrounded me, their fists clenched and their wills stern, the Maiden has risen out of the clouds of darkness to lift me up, making me pounce into the air like a tiger past my desire to give in and die. I've Left behind a trail of half-dead men on wooden floors. Hail the Maiden and her mighty ways.

I'm staring at the bus driver. Wondering what it must be like to be him. He seems like a good man. Someone who would have a family that he loves. He's sitting near a man in a suit. A thief who steals money from the poor? Stole how much money this piece of shit? My rage is climbing into my throat when a skinny blonde girl walks in and sits across from me. She's wearing headphones and I grab one of the headphone earpieces out of her ears and put it in my ear.

Pop music . . . I take the headphone earpiece out of my ear and throw it at her face. Beautiful or not - there is no excuse for such a blatant lack of depth. What happened to the good hip hop? Slum Village, De La Soul. All of us have a duty to carry some semblance of substance within us. Even those of us who look like we belong in a JC Penney catalog. Maybe *especially* these sorts of people. Music is supposed to have something to tell us.

The conductor saw me grab the girl's headphone earpiece and toss it at the girl. He tells me that *I better leave her alone or he will call the cops on me*. He'll have me arrested? Never.

"Of course," I tell him. "You know I don't like to start no trouble. I'm as peaceful as a nice summer's day." The bus keeps moving. Outside, there is a storm.

"These days make me long for a nice grave," I tell the conductor. "Somewhere in a pretty cemetery, where the snow will pile on top of my body for several inches, covering my grave and hiding my name so no one will ever know who I was."

The conductor says that I should keep my fucking mouth shut so I lower my head and stare at my nails. Somewhere in the night, I hear a bird screaming. What is this bird shouting at? Maybe he is calling his fellow birds out for a stroll. Maybe he's singing to me, this magic bird. After all, *I'm on a hunt myself*. My crossbow is with me. My trusty crossbow. Tucked away inside this bag that I'm carrying. Along with books of course. Hemingway. Joseph Heller. Even a little philosophy. I've always thought that anyone who has the time to concoct a philosophy on life has had way too much free time on their hands (probably someone who hasn't worked with

his hands or really labored during his life).

I've labored. Oh yes, I have labored. In coffee shops and supermarkets, fixing cars and lifting crates - working and working until my fingers became bloody stubs of bone covered in crimson paint. The train stops and I thank the conductor and leave. He was a bastard, telling me that I can't throw headphones at a bitch devoid of substance, a Barbie doll, a damn Muppet singing some stupid song while listening to other Muppets singing. I jump off the train with my bag (and my crossbow). Walk for a couple blocks until I see where she used to work. Ray's Diner. I see those flashing neon lights and a glimmer of hope finds its way into the dark crevices of my sunken heart. I walk towards the diner in the middle of the rain, clenching my teeth as these soldiers fall on top of me. *Plop. Plop. Plop.*

I swing open the door to the diner and find a surprised (perhaps horrified) manager. A fat sort of man with oily hair, the sort of man you would expect to find in a place like this, the sort of man who has a wife and kids, comes home to a warm meal and a couple beers, maybe a football game, some good old boy style songs by Garth Brooks or Clint Black.

"I need Celia," I say. "Get her for me now! I require her presence for a meeting. A special sort of meeting between a man who loves her and her heart. *You understand?*"

The man nods and tells me she isn't here. I can tell he is lying. Should I shoot him? That crossbow is calling to me, whispering in my ear, but I don't listen to him. Fuck the crossbow. At least for now.

"I think you should tell me where she is," I tell the manager. "Listen to me, you greasy bastard. I'm not the type of motherfucker you want to have a problem with."

The manager tells me to get the fuck out of the place so I pull out my loaded crossbow and show it to him. He shuts his mouth and says that I should sit down and wait. He'll get me some coffee. Nice and dark. Just the way I like my coffee - no sugar, no cream. I may be stupid but I'm not a complete moron (at least I don't think so). The manager is trying to buy himself some time to call the police. Not so easy, my proud working citizen. Not so easy. I point the crossbow at him and tell him I'm going to kill him if he doesn't give me Celia's address. Sweat is pouring down his face now, shooting forth from his pores like a geyser at Yosemite, drenching his shirt. He thinks

that he's going to die - and I can't tell him he's completely off in making that assumption (after all, can I even control myself?).

Finally, he reaches into a drawer and pulls out a card. Hands it to me, his hands shaking. I'm staring into his eyes. He looks into mine and sees the flaming skulls on my eyeballs - red and menacing, burning with the flames of Hell.

"This is her home address," the manager says. "She moved a short while ago. That's the information that she gave me."

I nod and look at an old bitch sitting at the counter, wearing a summer dress. Her face looks strange, all crumpled up like God had reached down and squeezed it. As I think about God squeezing her face, I realize that this is a blasphemous thought and I cross myself (I ask Him for forgiveness). I run. I get the fuck out of there. I kick the diner door open and head off as fast as I can go. Jump over walls and fences. I run so hard that I'm covered with sweat and my sweat tastes different than the water from the rain storm drenching my face. I run and run until my legs hurt like hell. My feet start to ache. Then, I slow down but I keep running. I run for a little while at a slow pace. Then, I walk. I catch my breath and walk it off (realize I have a cramp in my leg and it hurts like hell). Then, I stop. I stop and sit down. Then, I lay down on the concrete and let the rain wash over me, cleanse me.

I fall asleep lying on that concrete sidewalk. When I wake up, the rain is gone and the sun is shining. I'm soaking wet and people are staring at me. The sun blasts into my face like a great big orange menace, making me shield my eyes to protect them from its tyranny. What the fuck do I do now? Oh yes. I forgot. I'm after her. I'm after Celia. Time to go back to work. But what would happen if I found her anyway? I would shoot her with my crossbow and kill her. What would that accomplish? Nothing much. She would slump over, dead, with a great big arrow sticking out of her chest. Although the image makes me smile - a great big smile - I can't really justify murder to myself anymore. The anger of the previous night is gone. Its been replaced by a sort of complacency.

Perhaps the best thing to do is to forget the entire affair and move on with my life. I hear that hunting season is starting soon. Perhaps my arrows would be better deployed against wild beasts as opposed to domesticated city-dwellers? I take some comfort in thinking that the arrows of my crossbow will still be used.

They will not sleep in my apartment, useless and lonely. They will serve some purpose. With that thought in mind, I walk off humming to myself, happy as clam. I love this town and I love my crossbow.

17. PATCHOULI

Patchouli had been born without a right hand. He had a stump at the end of his arm. Folks used to say the reason he drank so damn much was because he resented God for not having given him that hand. Maybe he would have drank the same regardless of what appendages he had or didn't have. *Patchouli drank like there was tomorrow*. Every night he wasn't working. Just sittin' on a bar stool, guzzling down whisky on the rocks. At the end of the night, the bartender would lead him outside and - if it wasn't that cold - leave him lying on the parking lot. If it was cold, they would let him sleep in the basement, close to the boiler and he would leave early the next day.

His wife was a girl named Sunshine. Her teeth were a *disgusting mess*, some sticking to the left and others pointin' right. It was hard for people in the town to talk to her without looking at those teeth. They were that bad. And she tended to have some serious breath too.

On October 11, 2003, Patchouli arrived at his job at the grocery store on time. He greeted Remy, the store owner, and relieved him at the cash register. Remy left through the front door, saluting on his way out. That was Remy's custom, saluting each time he walked out, like he was some kind of general in a grocery store army. Patchouli's shift started at 7:30 p.m. The start of the shift was like any other. He picked up bottles of booze from the back and stocked them on the shelves. He took two cigarette breaks and he only took one bathroom break.

By 8:30 p.m., all the booze had been stocked. Patchouli called his wife and spoke with her briefly. Sunshine was ironing his clothes. He tried to drag out the conversation but ran out of things to say and hung up after forty five minutes. Sitting in his chair behind the cash register, leaning back, Patchouli thought about his father. He had never known his father. He wondered whether he was someone important. Around 9:30 p.m., his friend Ziggy (who looked like a darn Rastafarian) showed up with his girlfriend Martina (a hot lil' piece of ass, if

I do say so myself). Ziggy gave him some flyers for a show he was going to be playin' and told him to come to the show.

After Ziggy left, Patchouli just stared into space. Just *stared* and *stared*. Nothin' else to do. He got up to stretch his legs. Approaching the door, he pressed his face tight against the glass and pretended that he was on the transparent floor of the Empire State Building, looking down. Then, he did some jumping jacks and push-ups. He was able to do about twenty of each before he gave up. He just lay there on that floor and tried to do some sit-ups but gave up on that idea pretty quickly. So, he just lay on the floor of the grocery store, staring at the ceiling. He started dreaming about some dragons he had seen on the tube, some kind of a movie.

Some customers finally showed up and he jumped up from the floor and got behind the cash register. The woman was alone, mid-forties, tired face. She didn't ask any questions and purchased almost fifty dollars worth of liquor. She walked out with a smile. She had a night of partying ahead of her. About a half-hour after she left, Dr. Ackerman appeared. He purchased a bottle of wine and left without saying a word. He was a regular, purchasing a bottle of wine a day. After Dr. Ackerman, no more customers came for another hour.

By 2:00 a.m., the place was dead. It was Tuesday. Patchouli closed up shop and headed home. As he was walking to his car, he noticed three women standing around his car wearing short skirts. Very short skirts. Unusually short skirts. All of them with really nice legs, firm and toned. Tight abs too. Nice *asses*.

"That's my car," Patchouli said. The women laughed.

"Look at this little bitch," one woman said.

"Seriously, that's my car," Patchouli repeated.

The woman sitting on the hood of the car was strangely muscular for a woman . . . but she was not a cross-dresser. She was a woman, all right. Just a very strong, muscular sort of woman. She gave him a look and reached into her purse. She pulled out a large knife and licked the blade.

"You ever been stabbed by a ho before?" she asked him. Patchouli froze.

"Um, no," he replied. "I don't really want to be stabbed by anybody."

"Then you shut the fuck up," the woman said. "Why don't you have a hand anyways?"

"I was born without it."

The women started talking about johns and their children and getting arrested by the cops. Patchouli stood there with his hands in his coat pockets, waiting. Finally, the woman with the knife introduced herself.

"Howdy, I'm Brenda," she said. "I've done my sharing of trickin' around these parts but I have to say that you ain't someone I've ever seen before. At least, you're not one of my regulars."

"I'm Patchouli," Patchouli said.

"Patchouli?" Brenda asked. "That's a helluva a name."

"My daddy gave it to me," he replied. "Before he left, couple days after I was born."

"You know why you got that name?"

"I dunno," he said. "I got no idea. Maybe 'cause my shit don't stink?"

The women all laughed and Brenda got off the hood of his car. The laughter made Patchouli feel at ease. He bummed a cigarette off one of the women and stood there, smoking with them. One of them was going on about her children, how one of her boys can't pass any classes at school, how he might be slow or something 'cause her husband beat him. Brenda told him that she had been born in Tacoma, Washington, and that her dad had been a professional clown who had worked all the kiddy parties in town. But he had felt real sad inside, secretly, this supposedly happy clown. He would cry for hours in front of the mirror when he got home, curse himself 'cause he ain't made it as a musician. The stench of failure followed him everywhere.

Her daddy could play the guitar like no other person in the world. Jazz, soul, funk - all the good styles. Otis (her dad) could jam for hours but his improvisations sounded like songs on the radio. A genius. A master. A creative force with that guitar. He had gone to Seattle, lived on the streets, played in all kinds of bands, worked shit jobs to sustain his musical career. It just never worked out for him. After about a decade of living in Seattle, hoping for a record deal, he just gave up and moved to Tacoma. The worst town in all of the world, she said. The pits. The winters were harsh in Tacoma and there was almost never any light. Overcast every day. Otis tried to get a job as a music teacher but the salary wasn't high enough, so he heard about this "clown gig" and ended up becoming a kiddy party clown.

"That's horrible," Patchouli observed. "I would have hung myself."

"Well, that ain't the worst of it," Brenda said. "He just kept going like that for years on end. So, after a couple of years of hearing kids scream, having soda tossed in his face, twisting balloons into shape - he basically had a nervous breakdown. I was seventeen years old."

"What happened?"

"Well, my daddy locked himself in the bathroom for a couple hours while mama shouted at the door. Then, he jumped out the window and broke both his legs. Snap."

Brenda paused and looked at her watch. She finished up the story with a hurried rhythm. Basically, her daddy had been taken to the ER. After a couple questions, the cops had determined that Brenda's dad had to be incarcerated in an asylum - he couldn't formulate a sane sentence anymore. There was a whole complex procedure lasting several months, but her dad was involuntarily committed. Eventually, he was released. Seven or eight years later . . . but he wasn't the same. Couldn't hold down a real conversation. *Drooled all the time*. He ended up livin' alone on the other side of town, in a small house with mentally ill people. He continued to work as a party clown.

"That's horrible," Patchouli said.

"Yeah, well my mama got married to another guy who treats her good. So everything is o.k. with her at least. At least she's got someone to take care of her. That's more than I got. Flint ain't like that. Try to get someone here to take care of you. Have to go to a shelter for that, deal with priests or pastors. I ain't havin' no man tell me what my faith should be."

Then, one of the other women said that they should get back to work. Brenda gave him a kiss on the cheek and they walked off on their high heels. They were all high on something, so they looked as if they could fall at any minute, stumbling in one direction and then another. Patchouli got into his car and returned home to his wife. Sunshine was sitting on the sofa watching Christian television. She had made him some veggie burgers which were lying on the small table along with a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon. She knew his brand. He opened up the Pabst and ate his burgers, telling Sunshine about his conversation with the three women, about Brenda's story. Sunshine

pretended to listen.

Patchouli went to bed, leaving Sunshine with the TV. He dreamed about Brenda's father, sitting in a small apartment with his clown makeup on, crying, the tears running down his makeup, leaving trails. He was playing music on his guitar. The music floated into ethereal space, the treble clef staff floating, twisting and turning in the blackness. The notes glowed in the dream, bright blues and reds. Christmas lights. Children danced around the notes in the middle of the air. The children were maybe just an inch or two in height but Brenda's father was his regular size. The dream seemed to last forever. Brenda's dad playing something on the guitar, visible colorful notes emanating from the instrument, and the children dancing around the notes. The next day, Patchouli got in his car and didn't go to the bar. He drove to a store and purchased a newspaper to look at the classifieds. He noticed that all the good jobs required some kind of degree or certificate, some sort of professional training.

"Well, that's what I'll do," he said to himself. "That's what I'm gonna do dammit."

So, he went to a school a couple blocks away and signed up for nursing school. He had heard that nurses make almost \$75,000 after a couple years on the job. Plus, there is a shortage and you can always find work in the middle of a shortage. For the next three years, he went to the school instead of the bar and did his homework sitting on the couch while Sunshine watched TV. He also did his homework while working at the store. Helped pass the time.

Eventually, he graduated and moved into a larger home with Sunshine. Started working full time at a local hospital. Earned the respect from the doctors and the other nurses. Purchased himself a nice car. Even managed to get Sunshine to watch less television and do some exercise - and *fix her damn teeth*. Brenda died of a crack overdose sometime in 2007. Her body arrived at the hospital during his shift. She was DOA. He held her body and kissed her forehead. Held her close. His *angel*. She was his *angel*.

18. MACHO MAN

Joaquim wakes up and goes for a jog to the high school. He hops down the step of his home, runs out to the street and jogs to the end. Then, he cuts left across a path in between two houses leading to a parallel street. He

runs the opposite direction, ending up by the house directly in front of his own.

"Hey Buddy."

Joaquim turns his head to see Horace Winter, a dirty beast of a man with missing teeth standing on the sidewalk behind him, wearing a Tap-out t-shirt.

"Hey Horace."

Reaching the high school, Joaquim cuts across a grass lawn towards a track and begins running around the track. He runs for two hours, wearing a backpack containing boxing gloves, hand wraps and a change of clothes. Covered in sweat, he jogs off the track, back across the high school's lawn, and to the street directly in front of the high school. He has to make it to the gym before he is too tired. He runs to the boxing gym, trying his best to clear his mind of any thoughts along the way. Jenny left him. He shouldn't think about it . . . shouldn't dwell on it.

The boxing gym. The boxing gym is a small wood structure resembling a barn. From outside the barn, the sounds of heavy bags being battered can be heard. He loves that sound. He breathes in and allows himself to appreciate it. **BAM! BAM! BAM!** It is like a war drum. **BAM! BAM! BAM!** Entering the boxing barn, Joaquim is greeted with a high five from Lewis, a muscular Chicano covered with a thick coat of sweat. Joaquim slaps his hand, accepting the high five, and makes his way to a bench near the ring. He plops down onto the bench. Two young boys, one black and the other white, are dancing inside the ring, throwing jabs and catching punches. The white boy is apparently ahead on points because his corner, an old timer with a small scar across the bridge of his nose, keeps screaming at the white boy to stay away, motioning with his hand. "Stay away, Bobby! Don't you engage him! Don't play his game! The fight is almost over. Stay away! Don't engage him, Bobby!"

Sitting directly in front of the ring are two elderly gentlemen scribbling in notebooks. Judges. Or at least local guys the gym has hired to simulate the work of judges. The gym is developing its team for local competitions. The old men are probably workers who love the sport. In an economically depressed town like Flint, being a worker bee or a boxer are the only options available. Joaquim wraps his hands and slips on his boxing gloves. He uses his chin to push the gloves down to his wrists as far as they can go. Then, he walks to a heavy bag.

BAM! BAM! BAM! Joaquim pounds the heavy bag for an hour and then slips off his gloves and walks to the speed bag. He works on the speed bag for ten rounds. Each round lasts three minutes and is timed by a device plugged in at the opposite end of the gym. When the bell sounds, he stops and rests for thirty seconds, waiting for the start of the next round. The light on the device turns from red to green when it is time to start working again. He works the speed bag - *bippity, bippity, bippity*.

After working the speed bag, Joaquim shadowboxes in front of the mirror for a half hour, practicing his jab and straight right punch. He imagines himself fighting a larger man with a wicked right hook. As always, he is able to best the man in the end. He knocks down the big imaginary bastard with a straight right to his forehead. He imagines his punch piercing the man's skull, causing brains to come pouring out of the hole he has created. He imagines the man falling onto the canvas, screaming, his eyes rolling to the back of his head.

In real life, you can never take a man down with a punch to the forehead, a particularly thick part of the skull. You have to take them out with body shots. *Hard body shots*. Those beautiful hard body shots he loves to throw. They make a faint sound hitting the solar plexus, barely noticeable - *Bap!* - but they put a man down faster than elephant tranquilizer. After shadowboxing, Joaquim begins his ab workout. Two hundred sit-ups. Then, two hundred leg raises. He grunts with each leg raise, straining his abdominal muscles. He needs to get those abs in fighting shape.

"Good work," Old Georgie, the owner of the gym, exclaims, walking past Joaquim. "You're getting into shape now, that's for damn sure, boy."

"Thanks," Joaquim replies gruffly. "I still have a long way to go before I'm back in fighting shape. I've got to push myself harder. I wanna start fightin' again."

"Stop eating all of them donuts!" Old Georgie jokes, walking away.

Joaquim follows his abdominal workout with a hundred pull-ups. Then, he performs one hundred push-ups without stopping to rest. He needs to sweat it all out, all of his stress, all of his memories. He needs to sweat Jenny out of his system. He slips his gloves on and proceeds to the ring. Time for a little therapy.

"Wanna spar?" Jesse, a skinny hick, cries out from the shadows. He knows Jesse, knows that Jesse used to

have - much like himself - a little problem with the booze. Another former boozier using boxing as a way to sweat everything out.

"Sure," Joaquim replies.

The two enter the ring and touch gloves. Jesse begins aggressively, as is usually the case with the local thug fighters, all heart and very little technique. Joaquim is hit a few times during the first minute of the first round but is able to dance his way to safety easily. He finds his angles and controls his breath. He is a fish. He is never nervous. Regardless of the aggressiveness of Jesse's rage-fueled assault, Joaquim remains perfectly composed.

Finding the correct angle for attack, Joaquim begins a slow but steady assault, focusing on body punches. He catches a punch from his opponent with his glove and slips in a liver shot with the same hand. Then, he throws a shot in towards the front of the body. A perfect shot. *Bap!* He backs away as Jesse moves forward, hurt and enraged. Joaquim waits for Jesse's vengeful punch and catches and slips the punch when it comes. He moves to Jesse's side and slips in an uppercut to Jesse's ribcage. He follows the uppercut to Jesse's ribcage with a hard straight punch right to the chin.

Joaquim moves into Jesse's line of sight, *directly in front of him*. Slightly stunned from the punches, Jesse strikes at his head. Although the punch stings, Joaquim is able to stay calm and slip in a jab. The jab hits Jesse's solar plexus for a second time, sending the younger man reeling back in agony. *Bap!* That beautiful body shot sound, soft and sweet. Recomposing himself quickly, Jesse jumps forward with another punch which Joaquim catches and slips. Joaquim throws the exact same combination a second time. Poor Jesse is so nervous that he has made the *same mistake twice*, leaving his body open. He throws the uppercut to Jesse's ribs, following the uppercut with a second hard straight punch to Jesse's chin. Will Jesse make the same mistake again? Will he come forward, tossing wild punches?

Jesse *does*. Instead of recomposing himself and remaining calm, Jesse reacts with anger again, jumping forward and throwing a wild punch. Joaquim easily catches the wild punch with his glove and slips, following the slip with an uppercut to the ribs and a straight punch to the chin. Three times in a row. *The same combination*.

Joaquim can hear Old Georgie laughing outside the ring. These local thug fighters will never learn. It is

hard for them understand strategy and rhythm. They are wired to be nervous, to believe that uncontrolled aggression is part of boxing. *Controlled aggression* - that is the key. Joaquim slips an uppercut in directly in between Jesse's guard and slips in for a hold. Angry, Jesse attempts to push Joaquim away from the clinch, but Joaquim continues to hold, refusing to let go. When he finally does let go, Joaquim slips a punch to Jesse's chin and follows the punch with a straight jab to the solar plexus. *Bap!* Another beautiful body shot.

As Jesse bends over, hurt, Joaquim begins to work at a faster pace. He throws hooks into Jesse's ribs, striking with both hands, digging into the other fighter. As the other fighter slips out of the corner and moves back to the center of the ring, running away from the action, Joaquim tastes Jesse's blood. The knockout is about to come. *Ring!*

The bell ending the round sounds and Jesse has escaped a knockout. Jesse smiles happily from the other side of the ring, his blood-spattered yellow mouthpiece reminding Joaquim of children sucking down on orange slices. Jesse is happy that he has survived.

"I think I'll call it quits, here," Jesse announces, coughing a smoker's deathly cough. "My conditioning is off. I can't survive."

"All right, man."

Joaquim looks outside the ring to see if anyone else wants to spar. No one makes a sound. He slips off his gloves and grabs a jump rope. After jumping rope for twenty minutes straight, Joaquim drops down and performs fifty push-ups. Then, he goes back to the pull-up bar and does twenty pull ups. He focuses on *Jenny*, getting *Jenny* out of his system.

"I see you still have it," Old Georgie says.

"Yep," Joaquim replies haughtily, now sitting on the floor. He is exhausted, covered in sweat. "I just wish I could have fought another round."

"Come here Thursday night for that," Old Georgie replies. "No one comes here to spar during the day. Most people are at work. Shouldn't you be at work?"

"You know I'm all fucked up, Georgie."

“You got the weight of the world on your shoulders because of that Jenny. That’s what it feel like when a man done lose a woman that he care about. Just push through them feelings.”

“I’m not sure I *can*. I don't think I *can* forget her.”

“Jenny was a special broad . . .”

“The only woman I ever done loved.”

“Yeah, but she was a bitch just the same. They all just looking around for a big dog.”

“I was *her* dog, Georgie.”

“And she was your woman. She belonged to you.”

“Exactly, Georgie.”

“There’s a solution for that.”

“What’s the solution, Georgie?”

“Go on a hunt. Get a pack of your fellow dogs together. If you get some good hunting partners, you’re sure to come back with something. It’s probably for the best that she done left.”

“What do you mean by that?” Joaquim turns and stares directly into Old Georgie’s eyes.

“N-nothin’, Joey. Why are you starin’ at me like that? Jesus.”

“I just wanted to know what you meant.”

“I just meant that I didn't expect to see the two of you together for long. Jesus, Joey, you know what you did to that poor girl. You beat the hell out of her.”

“Yes,” Joaquim replies coolly. “I know what I did to that poor girl.”

“If half of them rumors are true, you should consider yourself lucky you ain't behind bars.”

Joaquim clambers up off the floor and walks to his backpack. He takes his backpack to the changing room and showers, thinks about all of the times he made love to Jenny in a shower. He thinks of Jenny’s beautiful, naked body. Then, he puts on a clean set of clothes and walks out. Reaching fresh air, he walks up the street until he reaches a small house. He enters the house.

“I’m here to see Dr. Vanessa,” he announces to the blond behind the front desk.

The blond girl smiles and asks him his name. She picks up the telephone and dials a number. She speaks with someone on the other end and waives Joaquim towards the door to the office. Dr. Vanessa is sitting behind her desk. She doesn't look up when he enters. She continues typing. Joaquim sits down on the bright red couch. Eventually, Dr. Vanessa leaves her desk and sits across from him in her comfortable, padded chair. She stares at him patiently. She looks like a man. Somehow, that makes it easier.

“I’m here because I don’t feel no better. Them meds don't work.”

“I figured that. Otherwise, there would be no reason for you to be here.”

“I guess I could be here trying to get some.”

“Every male patient makes that joke. It’s not funny.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Tell me what the problem is.”

“I tried to kill myself again this last weekend. Someone found me, doc. They saved my life. The EMTs were able to get me to the hospital before I died.”

“What were you thinking about?”

“What do you mean?”

“What were you thinking about right before you tried to kill yourself?”

“I don't know . . .”

“Can I give it a guess?”

“I could have been thinking about anything. What does one think about before grabbing a kitchen knife and cutting one’s wrists?”

“I think you were having feelings of guilt.”

“Guilt? What do I have to feel guilty about?”

“You tell me. Maybe I’m wrong, but I think you tried to kill yourself because you have feelings of guilt over things that you did. That’s my professional opinion. You drove the love of your life away. She left her family, her home in order to get away from you.”

“You think I tried to kill myself because of that?”

“I think that would be a fair assumption.”

Joaquim ran his fingers through his hair and stared out the window towards the doctor’s backyard. Dr. Vanessa lived in and ran her offices out of her house. He wondered whether she was ever scared to treat people like him in her home. After all, his therapy involved probing his innermost insecurities. What if he had been a dangerous rapist rather than a mere, stupid domestic violence offender? What if she went too far and he became angry and decided to hurt *her*? Maybe Dr. Vanessa was afraid of him. Maybe she was a fish, just like him. Good at hiding her feelings.

“I think you have a lot to feel guilty about,” Dr. Vanessa continued.

“Couldn’t this muster up feelings that could make me want to kill myself again?”

“You have those feelings anyways. You may as well get them out into the open.”

Joaquim gasped for breath, feeling his body heat rise. He did his best to calm himself, closing his eyes and controlling his breath. He was the master of his own emotions. He was the master of his own thoughts. He had nothing to fear. Nothing. *Nothing*. But . . . he was angry . . . that anger surrounded him, building up slowly until it was ready to explode . . .

“She *liked* to get hurt, Jenny did. She *loved* to get hurt. She *liked* it, the abuse. She was *into* it. *It turned her on*. Our first few times together, I tried to respect her. We shared our feelings, our dreams. I had never connected with anyone like that . . . but she began to *change*. I could tell that she was longing for more. *She wanted to get hurt*. The first time I hit her, she was drunk as a skunk, calling me names. I grabbed her cheek and squeezed hard, pulling her towards me and telling her to shut up. She was loving every second of it. Suddenly, I had her respect. I slapped her even harder. Then, I began choking her. I did her in every possible position in the book - missionary, doggy-style, whatever. I grabbed her cigarettes - they had fallen on the floor. I opened the pack and I saw a lighter tucked in there with a couple of cigarettes. I grabbed a cigarette and I lit it up. I put the cigarette out on the small of her back.”

Silence fills the office while Dr. Vanessa stares off into space. The doctor lifts herself off the chair and

paces up and down the office, sucking down deep breaths. Then, she walks over to her computer and types for a couple seconds. She walks back to the chair and sits down. She has regained her composure. She is disgusted by the sight of this horrible man.

“Why do you feel guilty, if it all was really consensual?” The doctor asks, calmly.

“I feel guilty because I was thinking of myself, my ego, placing it above her. I shouldn’t have thought about how to make myself feel like a man. I should have been thinking about how to heal her.”

“You should have been thinking of ways to make Jenny stop needing this type of abuse. That’s why you feel guilty.”

“But I was afraid that she was going to go to another man who was going to do these things to her. I was afraid that she was going to leave me behind.”

“I seriously doubt that she liked it,” Dr. Vanessa says coldly. “I think you’re fooling yourself. I think you want to believe that she liked it.”

Joaquim lifts himself up off the couch and walks out without saying a word. Fuck Dr. Vanessa. He stands outside the office building and looks up the street to the train station. He walks to the train station and stands in line until he reaches the ticket booth. Then, he purchases a one-way ticket from Flint to Detroit. *He needs to see Jenny.* He needs to bring her back to Flint.

After purchasing the ticket, he walks to a bar across the street and sits down on a shaky stool. The bartender, an old bastard with a busted up nose and a band-aid covering a cut on his cheek, smiles at him and comes over with a mug of beer. Joaquim drinks the beer in one gulp and then drinks a second beer the same way. Seven more beers are swallowed down in the same manner. Joaquim walks over to the juke box. Surprisingly, he is able to find a song he likes. He sits back down on the barstool and listens to the song.

He drinks four more beers and the world becomes hazy. At some point, a redhead sits next to him and starts making conversation. He can't understand what she is saying but she seems to be enjoying his words. She is laughing. There is a number written in lipstick on the napkin by his beer. She gets up and leaves. An old guy sits next to him and starts making conversation. Joaquim doesn't understand a word coming out of the man’s mouth.

The two seem to be getting on.

At this point, Joaquim blacks out and goes into the inner recesses of his mind. He feels like molasses being poured out of a jar. It is as if he is in an inner sanctum, some corner of his mind far away from Jenny and the whole mess. *Jenny - where are you?* He has to find Jenny. He has to find Jenny and get her back. He needs to tell her that she is his property - that he *owns* her.

WHAM!

He feels something hit him in the face. He looks down at his hand and sees blood. In front of him is a kid in his early twenties in a boxing stance. The kid comes forward and tosses another punch at him. Joaquim easily slips the punch and backs away, creating distance between himself and the kid, but the kid keeps coming forward. The kid is swinging wildly but Joaquim is easily avoiding the punches, backing up before each punch can reach him. After a few seconds, Joaquim sees an opening as the kid winds up to throw a right hand and his left hand drops to his side. He can see the kid's jaw completely unprotected and comes forward to throw a right hook to the jaw, followed by a punch right to the stomach and then an uppercut to the jaw. The kid is stunned as Joaquim clinches him and tosses his knee into his scrotum.

The kid screams and drops to the concrete, rolling on the street. Joaquim starts stomping the kid's head, smashing the boy's skull against the pavement until blood starts to gush. The kid's face is covered with blood in a matter of seconds. The boy staggers to his feet and is met with a left hook to the temple and another uppercut to his jaw. Joaquim moves forward and tosses another punch right into the kid's stomach. **BAM!** The kid howls and drops to the concrete, crying. As the kid rolls around on the concrete, a redheaded girl approaches Joaquim.

"Hey fella," she says, "I appreciate you standing up for me against my boyfriend but you didn't need to mess him up that bad. I don't think he's ever going to be able to have kids." She laughs a mad laugh, her face glowing blue, illuminated by the neon sign on the side of the building. They are in the alley outside the bar.

"What the hell am I doing out here?" He asks himself out loud.

"Are you catching the train?" The girl asks.

"Yes, I have to get to Detroit."

"Why are you goin' *there*?"

"I don't remember. Or maybe I do but I don't feel like talking about it."

"What time does your train leave?"

"Seven in the morning. I was going to drink here until closing time and sleep on a bench."

"Seven? I guess we have some time, then." She takes his hand and they leave the kid behind, doubled over on the concrete, moaning. The redheaded girl leads him to a grey Mercedes and unlocks the doors by pressing a button. He opens the passenger side door. Looks at his hands. His knuckles are bleeding. He is sure his face doesn't look that great either. He wonders how long he had been standing still before he snapped out of his daze and realized he was in a fight. How many hits had he taken? What had provoked the fight? They ride until they pull up to a house with a large lawn and three cars parked in the driveway.

"My dad doesn't care what I do."

"Sounds good."

They go into the house via the front door and proceed down to the basement. There is artwork everywhere - oil paintings. Maybe members of her family? The house has at least ten bedrooms, three floors, and a finished basement. They enter a small bedroom in the basement, decorated with music posters. The girl rips the comforter off the bed and throws it on the floor. Then, she removes her clothes. Joaquim is sober enough at this point to notice that she is an attractive girl, very pale, blue eyes, shoulder-length red hair. Maybe a sorority girl? She has a tattoo of a butterfly on her lower back.

"I like to keep my socks on," the girl whispers, climbing onto the bed. She points her backside to him, laying on the bed on all fours.

"Let's go to work," he says. The girl laughs.

He is not rough with her. He kisses her passionately as she gives herself to him. For a second, all the troubles of these last few weeks seem to disappear. He is temporarily free. But he misses Jenny. Where is Jenny? *She belongs to him.* Sometimes, he could hear a voice whispering in his ear while he was torturing Jenny: *Spill her blood for me. Spill her blood for Berith.* He heard that voice all the time.

"Would you like something to drink? There's a freezer here in the basement."

"What do you have?"

"I can make you a vodka and cranberry."

"Sounds good."

He is soundly asleep before she returns. His mind drifts. Ghosts from the past greet him with stupid jokes and warm embraces. The ghosts of the past wring his soul like a mother wringing the soapy water out of a bath towel. His mother. His father. The whole gang. Everyone from his childhood. They all seem to be calling him. He hears the voice: *Spill her blood for me. Spill her blood for Berith*. Joaquim tries to ignore that voice.

The next day, the redheaded girl drives him to the train station and he boards the train. He falls asleep in Flint and wakes up in Detroit. The sky is gray and the wind bitter, angry, and cold. The trip was instantaneous. As the train comes to a stop, he hears the voice again: *Spill her blood for me. Spill her blood for Berith*. Joaquim ignores that voice.

"Jesus," he says to himself.

"No shit," the guy next to him, a fat old bastard with a wrinkled face, announces. "As much as you try to get away, its always back to Detroit. This place is like a cesspool or something. People talk about Flint but this is just as bad."

"You'd think the government would've bombed this place by now."

"Nah," the old bastard jokes, his bad breath pouring out of him. "If they bombed Detroit, where would the government get all of its laboratory test subjects?"

"They have to get them from somewhere."

The old bastard laughs and they part ways. Joaquim is back in the D, with its multi-colored people and uniform drabness. He makes his way to a coffee shop and sits down next to a girl wearing a tight dress. She keeps staring at him as if he was a piece of meat. She makes no bones about staring right at his package. She keeps biting her thumb. *Spill her blood. Spill her blood for Belith*. Joaquim ignores the voice. He drinks a cup of coffee and eats a bagel with some cream cheese. Then, he sits back and watches the people walk by. Fucking people. He

hates people. Inside the coffee shop is a television showing the news.

Jenny.

Jenny Louis.

Found dead.

Body showing multiple slash wounds.

Found dead at battered women's shelter.

His head starts spinning and he has to stare up at the ceiling to keep himself from vomiting. Could this really be happening? Could the news anchor actually be telling the truth?

Jenny.

Jenny Louis.

Found dead.

He hangs around long enough to see a picture of himself displayed on the television. Luckily, the picture shows him wearing a goatee. Since Jenny had left him, he had lost the goatee. He looks like a completely different person. Thank God.

Jenny.

Jenny Louis.

Found dead.

He is the primary suspect in the murder. He doesn't feel nervous. He doesn't feel anything. It isn't real. Reality has dissolved and transformed itself into a sea of orbs. Nothing has any detail. Everything is out of focus. Someone says something to him but he doesn't understand it. The waitress is speaking to him. He has to pay his bill before he can leave. He gives her a five dollar bill and tells her to keep the change. She smiles at him and thanks him.

"Jesus," he mutters to himself, gasping for breath. "Of course I'm the primary suspect. I'm the only reason that girl was in that shelter."

Had he come to Detroit to kill Jenny? Had some unexplainable force brought him to Detroit to choke

Jenny to death? Had someone else gotten there first? He walks the streets until he comes across a brick building. "Jacobs Motel - Cheap." He needs to lay down. He pays the \$35 fee for one night, grabs the key and makes his way down the hall to his room. The walls are bare brick, the floor is uncarpeted concrete. He hears the voice: *You were too late. Someone else spilled blood for Berith. But Berith is still in you. Berith will always be with you.*

"Nice place," he says to himself, entering his room. He lays down on the bed and closes his eyes. Jenny. Jenny Louis. Found dead. He is flooded by a deep feeling of regret. He had beaten her, abused her. *You were too late. Someone else spilled blood for Berith. But Berith is still in you. Berith will always be with you.* He had done everything that a human being should never do to another. She has seen the worst of him, the dark side. A knock comes from the door. Joaquim opens the door and finds the girl from the coffee shop standing alone. She has followed him from the coffee shop to the hotel.

"Hey," she says. "Can I come in?"

"What do you want?"

"What do you think I want? I want to know if a good-looking guy like you could use a little company. You just arrived in the neighborhood. You could use a little entertainment."

"How much?"

"Sixty dollars for the fucking. I also have some ecstasy pills and weed. Thirty bucks per pill and fifty dollars for an eighth of the weed."

"I need liquor, too."

"Two hundred bucks with the liquor."

"Come back with the liquor."

A half-hour later, the woman is back. She enters the room, a case of beer in one hand. Twenty four beers. Something to help him forget for a while. *Fuck the whore for me. Fuck the whore for Berith.*

"The two of us are going to drink each of these twenty-four beers," Joaquim announces. "Then, we're going to smoke the whole eighth of this weed and fuck the rest of the night."

Twenty-four beers later, they are naked and he is kissing her feet. She is holding a lit joint in one hand,

taking deep puffs. He has discovered that her name is Jasmine. She is twenty-four years old, has two daughters and a husband. The husband doesn't work - he is lazy - so she makes the bread anyway she can. Jasmine is dark-skinned. She has a sharp, well-defined nose, thin lips, and straight hair. She has long, thick legs and perfect breasts. The two of them lay in bed, smoking the rest of the marijuana, until they fall asleep. She falls asleep laying on his chest. He wakes up in the middle of the night and sees her pressed up against him, snoring. Some people trust easier than others. This poor girl didn't see him for who he really is.

"What about my pills?" He asks her the next day.

"Oh," she replies, smiling, "I almost forgot." Jasmine reaches into her purse and hands him two pills. Then, she hands him her cell phone number. He can call her any time to relieve some stress. Joaquim swallows a pill. Jenny. Jenny Louis. Found dead. *You should have been the one. You should have been the one to kill her for Berith. Berith is disappointed in you . . . but you will come to please Berith . . . you will come to kill for Berith.* As soon as the ecstasy hits him, he walks outside. It is a beautiful day, the sun striking him with its terrible rays of honesty. Illumination. No place to hide. He jumps onto the People Mover, Detroit's elevated rail system, as the ecstasy shifts from low to high gear. He is rolling at full speed now. The world seems to unite itself into one smudge on the train window. His brother lives in Detroit. He has to find his brother.

"Robby- where the fuck are you?" He asks himself out loud, as the other passengers gaze at him with prying eyes. Omalisa was Robby's girl and would know where Robby, his brother, could be found. Joaquim feels connected to each soul in this city. The train stops and he starts running past the crowd.

"Omalisa, I'm coming!" He screams out at the top of his lungs.

"Yes, you are brother," a black cabbie replies, laughing. "Don't give up, brother."

He keeps running until he is covered in sweat. He has arrived at the Boo Boo Lounge, where Omalisa works. If Omalisa isn't inside, he can find out when she is coming and wait for her. *It should have been you. It should have been you who spilled her blood for Berith.* He bums a cigarette from a homeless man. As he smokes, he thinks of the last time he saw Jenny. They had been in the kitchen and she had been mouthing off to him, as usual. She did that just to get punished. It was the punishment that turned her on, that made her love him. She had

started calling him names again, taunting him, saying that he was just a stupid ex-con and that he would never amount to a damn thing. She kept saying that he was never going to get anywhere with his life and that he wasn't worth the shoes he was wearing. She had called him a loser and a jerk-off.

He had begged her stop. He always begged her to stop, like a child asking a bully to leave him alone. He had felt helpless, belittled . . . and the anger had risen within him, taking control. His nails had dug deep into his hands. She had started laughing at him. He had heard the voice: *You're going to let her laugh? You're going to let her laugh at Berith? Punish her. Punish her for Berith.* He had begged her to stop but she wouldn't. He had grabbed her by her throat and dragged her to the kitchen floor, choking her and striking her in the face with a clenched fist.

"I'm glad she's dead," he says to himself. "Maybe I can get some peace. God save my soul and forgive me, I'm glad this girl is dead. The nightmare is over."

He heads into the Boo Boo Lounge and to Omalisa. He needs to find Robby. He needs to consult with Robby about the whole thing, about what to do with the police, how to handle the situation. On the center stage, a skinny girl is grinding down to the floor. The music pumps into his ears, making his heart race. He is in the jungle, the rhythms of the drums reverberating in his ears, traveling to his brain. It is the call of the wild. The howling of a wolf sounds somewhere in the distance and the wild jungle wind hits him hard. More wolves. He concentrates on the howling of the wolves, trying to discern a meaning behind their calls. He focuses on the howls until they become voices, chattering, a million bubbles of noise floating in the wind. He observes each bubble float by. One of the bubbles seems to be glowing and he focuses on it. He reaches out and touches the bubble, causing it to explode. He can hear the words inside the bubble. It is Omalisa. She is sitting directly in front of him now, speaking to him, a smile on her face.

"Hey, I've been calling you for like a minute now," Omalisa says.

"I'm sorry, Oma," he replies. "I didn't hear you. My mind was on other things."

"Robby figured you were back in town."

"Robby was right. I came to see her and she turned up dead before I even got here."

"Before?" Omalisa searches his face, inquiringly.

"Of course. I didn't kill her."

"So, you don't have nothin' to worry about."

"I think I might need a lawyer just the same."

"Gee, you think?" Omalisa asks sarcastically. "I know what the cops do to people."

"I need Robby to protect me. I need to see him."

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe Robby doesn't want to see you? After all, you let the whole family down with what you did to that poor girl."

"Robby has his own ghosts."

Omalisa pauses to think about the matter and nods, as if to admit that he is right. The two of them sit in silence for the better part of a half hour, staring at the women dancing. They drink several more drinks and Omalisa goes on stage to do a show. After her set is over, she returns to the padded red seats at their table. She doesn't bother putting on any clothes.

"You've changed," she observes. "You're not the same boy I once knew."

"Everyone changes."

"You need peace."

"Where is Robby?"

"Relax. I know where he is. I'll take you to him after my shift."

Omalisa sighs and opens her purse, removing a bag of white powder. She makes a line, removes a dollar bill from her purse. She sniffs the line. Then, she pours out more cocaine and sniffs another line.

"I still cost five hundred bucks."

"In this economy?"

"That's not funny."

"I don't have five hundred bucks."

"I'll take three hundred - a big discount."

"No."

Omalisa throws him a frustrated look and walks back to the stage, leaving him sitting alone. He has to find Robby. Growing up, it had always been Robby who had guided him. When he had ignored Robby's advice, he had ended up in the pen. It was in the pen that the anger had had more time with him and had grown within him. *Its just the two of us now. Just you and Berith. Now, I grow inside of you.* His head is spinning. Who had killed Jenny? Whoever it was had done him a favor. If Jenny's killer hadn't killed Jenny, he would've killed her at some point.

Omalisa has left the stage and is sitting down with a smallish Hispanic fellow with glasses. The smallish fellow has neatly combed hair and appears to be embarrassed. His hands are shaking and he keeps having to adjust his glasses. Omalisa returns with a mischievous smile and drops down into the chair in front of him, still beautiful and completely naked. She grabs her purse and places more cocaine on the table, sniffing two more lines. Then, she rolls the tip of a cigarette over a small amount of cocaine she has left on the table and lights the cigarette.

"You see that little guy over there?" Omalisa asks.

"Yes."

"His name is Norberto. He's a priest. One of my regulars."

"That's disturbing."

"He pays six hundred, just him alone."

"Jesus, a priest?"

"Saw me talkin' to ya, got turned on by the idea of a threesome. Wants one now. We're going to give it to him."

"I'm not doing a guy."

"You just have to do me. That's what he wants. He wants to see me take two. I told him that I would do it. I'll give you half of the five thousand . . . and I'll take you to Robby."

He nods. Omalisa lifts herself off the chair and gives him a wink. She hops over to the priest, across the club, and starts whispering. After a while, she disappears through a door in the back and the priest rises from his place and comes to sit with Joaquim.

“Hey, buddy,” the priest states. “I’m Norberto.”

“I’m Joaquim. Omalisa says you a priest.”

Joaquim can see Norberto’s eyes widen in a panic and his hands clench. The small man is trembling, biting down hard on his own lips. He looks like a furious elf on meth.

“*She wasn’t supposed to reveal that,*” the priest hisses. “Women! You can never trust them. They’re just evil. Eve was the cause of our destruction and she is no different from Eve. Oh, the horrors of the female sex - there is no end to their depravity. They punish us! They tempt us! They make it impossible for us to be more than animals. They make the animal in us rise to the surface. They . . . they’ve made me into a beast. I’m a goddamn beast because of them.”

“Last time I checked all of us were beasts, Father.”

“Not me! I was a savior. I took beasts and I made them human. I transformed people. I made them whole. Now, because of *women*, I’m just an *animal*. I’m as savage as you.”

The man starts crying, burying his head in his hands, his entire body trembling. Joaquim watches the priest’s agony with amusement. The priest begins huffing and puffing, and removes his glasses to keep the tears from dirtying the lenses.

“Does anyone ever really love anyone else, Father?”

"No."

Had Jenny ever loved him? Maybe she had known about the anger inside him and she had wanted to make that anger go away, to give him some relief from the pain. Maybe he had been compelled to hurt her by forces outside of himself. Evil forces. In prison, the demon had grown. *It had grown stronger.*

Five years of incarceration. Five years of eating bullshit food, smelling the stench of filthy prisoners, being yelled at by prison guards, wearing a prison uniform. Five years with the demon, whispering in his ear. One day, a young, blonde white boy had come to the jail. Michael. Sixteen years of age, placed in an adult facility for murder. Soft skin. Soft lips. He even looked like a woman if you squinted your eyes a little. Soft, pale, small nose, delicate features. No body hair at all. Almost as good as a woman. Not quite, but the closest thing he had seen in

four years. Four long, hard years. Four years without seeing one naked woman. He had found himself alone with Michael in the laundry room one day and he had not been able to keep himself from staring. He had grabbed Michael and placed him in a choke, opening up the back of his prisoner's garb, smashing his face into the concrete floor to keep him from yelling.

Joaquim had spent the year after the rape - his last year in prison - in complete silence. He had refused to speak to anyone. His words would try to escape his body but his anger would keep them inside. The demon had started growing, like a forest fire spreading over the mountainside until the entire mountain is in flames.

Omalisa returns and takes the two men by the hand, pulling them towards a door in the back. The three traverse the door and enter a small bedroom. Surprisingly, the bedroom is much like the bedroom in a suburban home with pictures of Omalisa and her family on the walls, a nightstand with a gold lamp, country style wallpaper and a white dresser. In one picture, Omalisa appears with an older, black man, presumably her father. In another, she is shown with another young woman wearing a gown - maybe her sister on graduation day?

Above the bed is a picture of Omalisa with Robby, the two of them kissing, holding cups of beer. A picture of the couple taken during a house party. Robby is kissing her with his eyes closed as Omalisa stares at him with her eyes wide open.

"Take off your clothes and get on the bed," Omalisa instructs, pointing to the priest. The priest removes his suit and climbs into the bed. Laying there, shaking, the priest looks a bit like a teenager. Omalisa climbs on top of the priest.

Joaquim hesitates for a second, seeing the picture of his brother hanging over Omalisa's bed. Then, he climbs onto the bed and enters Omalisa from behind as the priest eagerly thrusts into Omalisa from underneath her. The two men develop a rhythm, thrusting into her in unison, with equal force, as she clenches her teeth. The priest cums quickly and jumps off the bed. Joaquim and Omalisa stare at the little man, unsure of what has occurred. They surmised from his shrunken genitalia that he has finished and is leaving. The smallish man does not bother to say "goodbye." He opens the door to the room and walks out, screaming at the top of his lungs: "*Animals! Animals! Animals!*" Omalisa smiles and kisses Joaquim's neck, rubbing his shoulders.

"Your brother has me in here selling myself. All of it to pay his debts."

"Jenny is dead, Omalisa. Everyone is looking for me."

"I know. I also believe that you didn't kill her. You should take that as a blessing. Everyone knows that you came close to killing that girl a couple of times."

"The rumors are all true."

"Why?"

"I was afraid that she would leave me."

"She wanted to make you happy. She could see you have all this shit in your head and she wanted you to know that she would do anything for you. She wanted to absorb your pain."

Omalisa kisses him. They make love on the bed, quietly, sincerely, reminiscing about the past. "Let's sleep," she whispers. "I'm tired of this life and I want to sleep."

"Robby will be here soon, Omalisa."

"I never called him."

Omalisa kisses him passionately and returns her head to his chest. In a few moments, she is asleep. Joaquim kisses her forehead. Tears began to form in his eyes and pretty soon he is weeping, wishing that he could be a child again to do *everything* all over from the very start.

19. A REAL MAN

October 1. She found herself resisting the urge to smoke, staring at one cloud, large and irregular, engraved into that cold beyond. The cloud was the shape of a cigarette. The family dog, a brown mastiff, was chewing on a toy on the sparse grass, occasionally heaving the helpless victim up and then grasping it once more in its cruel jaws, thrashing its head back and forth viciously to choke out the last remaining vestiges of life. Turning away from the window and to her partner, asleep in their bed, she was struck with the vision of an intrusive worry line emblazoned upon Karen's otherwise smooth visage. Her hair was an incandescent yellow in

the meager light of a lamp on the nightstand, her lips burgundy and full, mounted on a strong but feminine face positioned at the summit of a voluptuous race track ending at two delicate pink feet.

Officer Rebecca Fisher was a thin woman of small stature, fifty-five years old, with long grey hair. With unexplainable difficulty, she separated herself from the sight of her partner, disturbed by the possibility that her lover might be suffering in her sleep. She shook her head and wished she could take that line away. But she *couldn't*. In fact, Rebecca Fisher couldn't even bring herself to act like a descent mate – *she was in love with two different women*.

She descended the staircase carefully, so as not to awake Karen, and walked to the dining room on her toes. She opened the red door and reached outside, grasping at the shaggy brown welcome mat, searching for the daily paper until her palm miraculously encountered a plastic bag. Pouring the newspaper out of the bag and onto the table, she meticulously searched, her eyes darting up and down each page inquisitively. *Had he killed Lily Cook?*

Having found nothing in the paper, she prepared herself for work, placing a shiny badge on her chest and a State Trooper hat on her head. She polished her black leather boots, straightened her shirt and pants. Then, she gave in and smoked a cigarette and cursed herself after each puff. Her cell phone rang and she gazed at the contraption.

"At the zoo gates."

"And then its all over?"

"Then its all over."

Officer Fisher heard the dial tone and proceeded to call into the station to request sick leave. Her voice trembled as she spoke to Marcy, the dispatcher.

.....

"The boy is from *Flint*," Dean David Jacobs said. It was seven in the morning. "Born and raised. He's from the ghetto."

"Jesus," Tayshawn Douglas replied. "I can't believe they're sending me a *clown*."

Tayshawn Douglas had been raised in Bloomfield Hills, where the words "downtown Detroit" were whispered with a mix of racism and fear. He hated rap music, vehemently supported the Republican Party, despised Barack Obama and tended to prefer watching Lifetime Television to watching BET.

Tayshawn worked with theoretical physics, solving the mysteries of the universe. It was his job to figure out how stars worked, how the sun kept the Earth warm, how the solar system gave birth to this tiny blue planet where life exists. He took his job seriously. Now, they were saddling him with a ghetto kid to serve as his secretary.

He met him later that same morning, around eight. Lakwan Billings was *ghetto*. He was respectful, of course. He had to be to keep his job. Tayshawn cringed as Lakwan said "worf" instead of "worth," "truf" instead of "truth," "ain't" instead of "isn't," or "aight" instead of "all right." Lakwan showed up for work in jeans and a button-down shirt. Professional clothes . . . but the way he *walked* bothered Tayshawn. Lakwan swayed from side to side rhythmically, smiling at the female students as he passed them by. Tayshawn knew *instantly* that he wasn't going to like the boy. Lakwan was twenty years old with a fade haircut and gold earrings. The boy looked like he could get himself women and that made Tayshawn Douglas angry.

.....

Tayshawn had taught physics at the Flint public schools for twenty-three years before beginning his career at the University of Michigan - Flint. He had a head full of white hair and white whiskers, both of his forearms decorated with military tattoos from his time in the service. On one arm, a U.S.M.C. tattoo with a bulldog and "1975" printed underneath it and, on the other, an AK-47. Tayshawn's home could not be called a home properly because he lived there alone and maintained the one bedroom apartment in a dismal state. Papers thrown about, walls decorated with torn posters of women clad in bikinis and athletes who had stopped playing a decade before. Several half-filled bottles of Jack Daniels and vodka.

On the morning of October 1st, Tayshawn woke up and grabbed a bottle half-filled with Jack and poured the substance into his mouth in a steady rainfall until the bottle had contained no more elixir. Then, he brutally assailed a wall, casting the bottle against it, tittering childishly at the sound of glass dispersing into a thousand

shards raining down on the beer-stained carpet like confetti.

.....

Lakwan. The last straw . . . they had given him a ghetto idiot as his secretary. . . he felt so revolted that he ducked out of work without telling anybody. He left campus at eight fifteen in the morning. *This* was going to be the day. *This* had to be the day. A damn ghetto idiot!!!! As he was leaving the campus, his cell phone rang.

"Who is this?" he barked.

"Sorry, sir," Lakwan said. "Just wanted to know where you were goin'. . . I want to update yo' calendar . . . Sorry for botherin' you . . . Just dat they say I gotta update yo' calendar each time you leave campus . . . you just ran off . . . we barely had time to talk . . . sorry to bother you . . . "

"I don't need no apology from you, boy!" Tayshawn snapped. "You piece of shit . . . and don't be flirting with the students anymore. As soon as we met, I saw you . . . smiling at all the girls passing by . . . "

"Excuse me? We just met this morning . . . we barely had time to talk . . . "

"You heard me, *nigger*," Tayshawn hissed.

"Why you callin' me dat, man? I'm callin' you 'cause I respect you and everyfing -"

"*Everything*," Tayshawn shouted into the phone. "Not *everyfing*. Say it right, you barefoot, uneducated negro. This is the last fucking straw!"

"Are you drunk? You talkin' like you ain't even black -"

"I'm sick of you ghetto negroes. Sick and tired of you."

"Have you been drinkin' sir? Listen, I'm just gonna hang up the phone, aight?"

"*All right!* Not '*aight!*'" Tayshawn screamed. Lakwan had already hung up on the other end. He was screaming at a dial tone. "Ungrateful, damn shack negro, good for picking corn and nothing else. I'm gonna show that negro how a real man - a respectable man - *earns* his right to have a woman. A man doesn't just flirt with girls, he takes the one he wants."

It was eight thirty in the morning. Tayshawn dialed Officer Rebecca Fisher's number. He had figured out that that lesbian was dating *his woman*. He had told her to stay away from his woman too many times, but she had

refused to listen. Finally, he had challenged her to a duel. Now, it was time to make good on that challenge.

.....

In another section of Flint, on October 1st, a woman by the name of Lily Cook was laying down luxuriantly on her bed, long legs stretched out under a blue flannel blanket. A call forced her to spring up in alarm out of an instinct she had picked up over the years, a sort of immediate impulse to protect herself from any unexpected noise. Nude as the day she had first seen the rays of the sun, she pulled the blanket away with a sigh and elegantly sauntered to the phone.

She had the vivacity of a twenty-three year old when she was really thirty nine, with a beauty so plain and uncomplicated – so *natural* – that it seemed shocking at first glance. Her brown eyes contained speckles of green and her porcelain nose, carefully crafted, was blessedly positioned over a flawless melody of white teeth surrounded by lips like lotuses in full bloom. Her studio apartment was empty, without any trace of her particularity, her essence or being. The walls were bare and white without so much as a picture of a family member or a calendar. The totality of her furniture consisted of a bed, couch and a table supporting a TV.

She had lived in the apartment for three years but the instincts from her past life informed her that she should refuse to fall into idle comfort. She should be ready to pack up and run. She had been beaten too many times, suffered too much abuse.

“Hello.”

“ It’s Tayshawn.”

“Tayshawn?”

“I just wanted to tell you that I love you.”

“You’ve told me that a million times, and I told you I’m not interested.”

“I just wanted to tell you that one *last* time.”

"Fuck you."

.....

Her thoughts flew back to the day when she had first seen Tayshawn at the Chaser Go-Go Lounge. She

couldn't remember the exact month or even the year. Unfortunately, waves of horrid men had forced her to drinking to the point of paralysis. She *drank* and *drank* and *drank* on a regular basis. She could remember that Tayshawn had walked in and sat right by the stage a couple hours before the after-work rush had deluged the Chaser Go-Go Lounge with lonely gawkers, imbibing large quantities of whisky, sporting loosened ties. Tayshawn had been wearing a yellow t-shirt – for some reason, she could remember that. He had asked her out on a date, a strange sort of thing to do in that type of establishment. She had politely denied his request. Tayshawn had begun to show up at the Chaser Go-Go Lounge on a regular basis. Assiduously in fact, from four to five in the afternoon, seven days a week. Tayshawn had become a strip club *addict*. He couldn't stop himself from showing up at the place. It was as if he thought the world would end if he failed to appear . . .

Knowing that her ex-husband Julio was the only one who would listen attentively, Lily made up her mind to call him. She maintained a good friendship with her ex. She had met Rebecca through him.

“Julio? I need to talk to someone.”

“About what?”

“It's – It's that piece of *shit* Tayshawn. . .”

“He called you?”

“Yeah. Seven calls now. I still have no clue how the motherfucker got my number. This time, he said he loved me and hung up. It was the strangest thing. No asking me out, no begging me . . . it was like he was ready to let go . . . I think he might be planning some shit . . .”

“Rebecca said she was going to look into it. She's a cop too.”

“I know that, Julio. I'm just worried. I'm just worried is all.”

“Listen. I wouldn't worry too much about this psycho. He's just lonely is all.”

That thought comforted Lily and, after some more idle chitchat, she very politely thanked Julio for taking the call so early in the morning. She looked under her bed and saw the box containing her revolver.

.....

Officer Julio Chavez had been sitting in his squad car, waiting for a speeder to appear on a chariot racing

by when Lily had called him. Not one speeder all day. His aviator shades protecting him from the incisive rays of a bright winter sun, he leaned his head back, his left hand hanging out the window. The days on patrol seemed to drag on forever, blending into each other. *Was it the fourth or the fifth? Maybe the sixth? Maybe it was the first? Like October first?* He had to stop drinking. He was sixty-two, well built, with a closely-shaven face and died hair strategically hiding his age. If anyone were to ask him his actual age, he would reply that he was “forty-five” with a stern expression that admitted no further questions - but he was fifty. His squad car was filled with candy wrappers and soda cans, as well as the occasional newspaper.

The radio blasted useless information spoken in a static-drenched alarming tone by the dispatcher, but his portable radio positioned on the dashboard drowned out the dispatcher’s voice. He had been listening to Rachmaninoff when Lily had called him. Now, he was listening to Gershwin, dialing Officer Rebecca Fisher’s number on his cell phone.

“Hello, Rebecca? Its Julio.”

“Hello. What’s going on?”

“Listen, I just wanted to tell you that Lily just called me. She said that Tayshawn piece of shit called her again.”

“Julio, I need you to do me a favor. I need you to get a table over at Sally’s Café. Get a table and wait for me. I got some shit I got to take care of.”

“What are you up to? What’s going on?”

“Just go there and wait.”

Rebecca hung up the phone and Julio started his car, driving to Sally’s Café and sitting down in a booth by himself. Time passed. He didn't mind that his ex-wife had gone lesbo and had started dating a female cop. The guys on the force made fun of him for it, said that Lily went lesbo because he didn't give her good dick. He knew the truth. *No one gave dick as good as he did.* He was glad to get rid of Lily. She was a pain in the ass. She was a better friend than a wife. He just wished he could watch Rebecca and Lily lez out together.

More time passed in that café, Julio imagining the two women, their bodies pressed against each other, their tongues weaving into each other. Julio gulped down five cups of coffee, went out for a cigarette, humming to himself. He spent time recalling his last holiday vacation with Lily, how tanned she had gotten in the Bahamas, how bright her smile had been. Instinctively, he knew that something was wrong. Could feel it in his bones. Like some kind of demoniacal electricity just coursing through his whole neurological system. All that was missing was the head of some god of mischief popping out from an open manhole to announce it. *Something was wrong.* So he ordered pancakes, his favorite dish and hummed some more. Finally, he called Rebecca again.

“Hello?”

“Hello?”

“Where is Officer Fisher? Who is this?”

“Tayshawn.”

“Where is Officer Fisher?”

“*I killed her.* We met here at the gates, drew guns the two of us. Just like we had spoken about, her and me. We placed our backs against each other. We counted out six steps together out loud and then we turned around and fired at the same time.”

“Where is officer Fisher, Tayshawn?”

“Neither of us cheated, I’m proud to say. We counted out six together and we turned around and fired. She’s dead. I’m not.”

.....

Tayshawn hung up the phone. Thousands of western novels had led Tayshawn Douglas to believe that when you killed someone in a duel, you had to be covered in blood. He was drenched in his own sweat instead. He knew that he should be trying to escape to a different part of the world – but he *couldn't* leave Lily Cook behind. She was perfect, Lily Cook. The embodiment of womanhood, tall and slender, meek but strong, self-reliant and intelligent, calculating but never cold. He parked his car in front of her apartment building and wiped the sweat off his brow with the palms of his hands. It was nine o'clock now.

On an ordinary day, he would be sitting in front of a classroom of his students, discussing coefficients, expounding on the concept of variables – *but he was tired of the ordinary*. He entered Lily's apartment building. It was a five-story structure with wood siding and faced a small fountain. He removed a key from his pocket and placed it in the lock, mentally thanking the corrupt locksmith he had called weeks before so he could have that key made without questions asked. Turning the knob, he pushed open the door and dived into an empty hall with a marble statue. The statue was of a young man with a peevish nose and mean eyes holding a discus on top of a pedestal, his muscles taut – as if the boy could come alive at any moment and toss the discus down the hall.

Otherwise, the hall was empty, save for the doors leading to private abodes. He had been there numerous times. He kicked until the door started to give, the edges of the frame splintering. He was going to get *his* woman. He needed *his* woman. But the door soon opened by itself without further battery. Blackness. Nothing could be seen past that door. Nothing could be heard. He squinted, trying to pierce the oblivion with his trusted orbs of perception. Something malformed appeared. He heard whispering, growing louder. And louder. And louder. Then, the whispering seemed to become a blast of static, tearing apart his ears, sending them flying from his own head, spinning into the blackness.

His brains got splattered all over a white wall. Before Tayshawn died, he recalled the very last words Rebecca Fisher had spoken. He repeated the same words softly: "*I love Lily.*" Lily stood over his body smoking, letting the ash fall on his lifeless corpse.

.....

"I love your dark, dark skin," Lakwan whispered in her ear as they lay in bed, her head pressed against his chest. "I want to eat you up like some cocoa pudding."

"Thank you baby," she whispered back. "I know you gonna take good care of this baby. I know you ain't gonna be like my daddy. You gonna take care of us."

He gazed into her eyes and told her something she already knew: "If I have to work two, three jobs, I'll take care of you, I swear. You're my black queen. I'll never leave you." Lakwan wasn't the type of man to leave his children behind. He stood tall, his head held high as he walked, always proud of himself. A proud black man. He

rose from the bed to go to the bathroom. He looked into his mother's room, opening her door. She was asleep on the bed, her massive chest heaving up and down. His father had left them, but his mother had raised him and his brother.

Looking into the toilet bowl as he urinated, he did his calculations. Aysheena could go back to work cleaning houses after the pregnancy and his moms could work for another ten years or so. If he held his job, his family could pay the bills. His job . . . something was wrong with Mr. Douglas. He acted like he hated black people, calling him a "nigger." Maybe he had said "nigga" on the phone? No, no. Mr. Douglas had called him a niggerrrr with that hard "r."

Mister Douglas? No, that man didn't deserve the prefix. It's just Tayshawn. Tayshawn hated his own kind, despised his own blood. What sort of man hates his own? What sort of man turns his back on his own? Lakwan began walking back to his bedroom. He kissed Aysheena and told her he was going to enroll in school part time, get himself a degree, try to do something for himself. He could do whatever it is he wanted after all, *as long as he took care of his own.*